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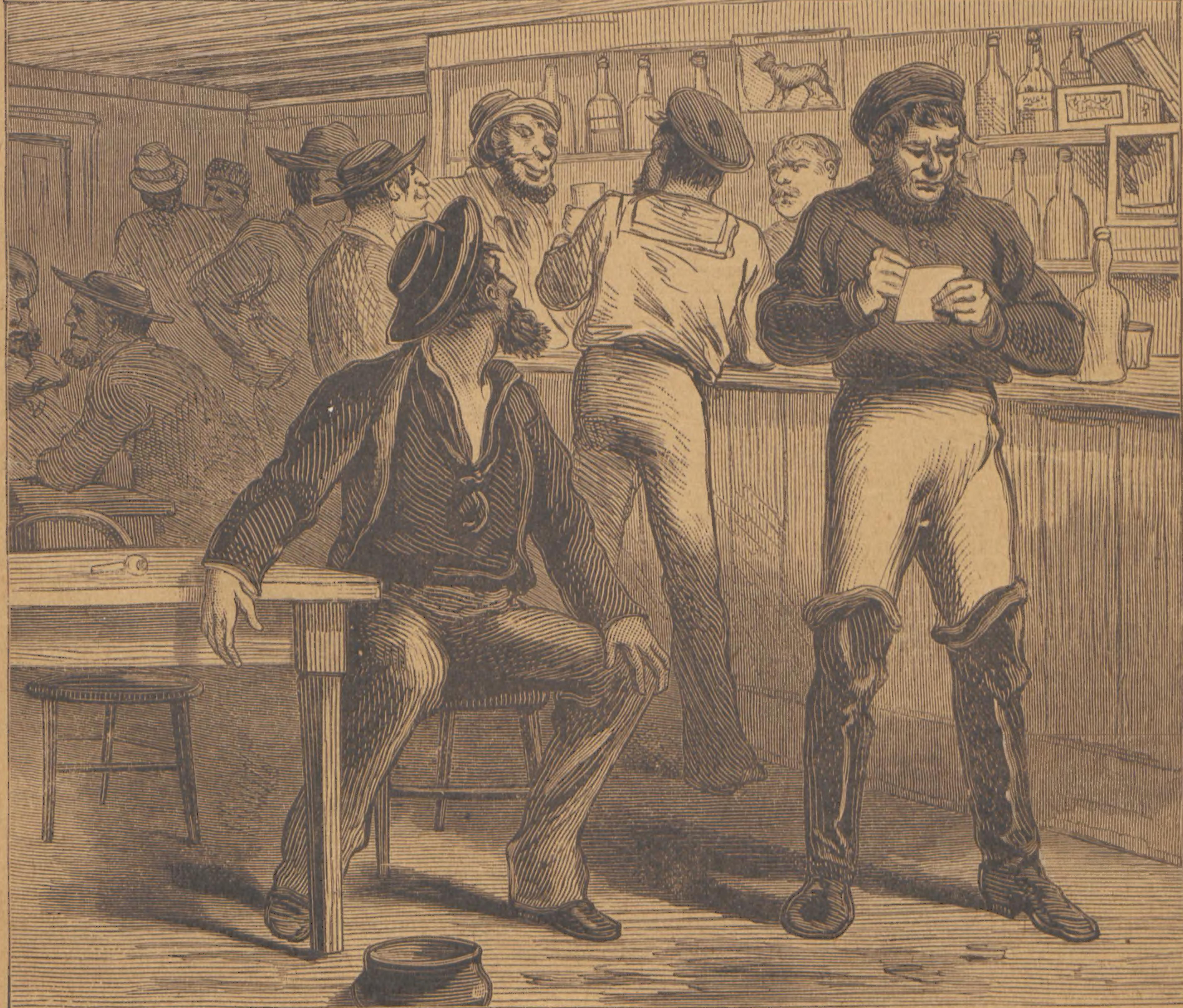
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THE GRIM LODGERS OF RAG ALLEY.

BY BEN. D. HALLIDAY, Reporter and Private Detective.



A ROUGH CHARACTER SEATED AT ONE OF THE TABLES WATCHED OLD FRINK, THE SAILOR, CLOSELY.

The Grim Lodgers of Rag Alley,
OR,
Citizen Rube of Number Seven.
A Romance of Fourth Ward Life
in New York.

BY BEN. D. HALLIDAY,
(Reporter and Private Detective.)

CHAPTER I.

A SAILOR WITH A SECRET.

"WHAT'S that I hear? Somebody tryin' ter thump the house down? 'Pears like it, I declare! Now, then, will you let up on that racket? You disturb my meditations an' unstring my narves!"

The speaker was a boy of fifteen years, who rejoiced in being the occupant of Room 99, No. 7, Rag Alley, in the city of New York.

There was nothing aristocratic about the combination. Neither Rag Alley, house Number 7, Room 99, nor the boy, rose to any degree of dignity, and if New York was judged by that immediate vicinity, it would never be selected as the grandest city of the New World. Grandeur kept away from Rag Alley.

The boy to whom reference has been made occupied a small, dilapidated room in the dilapidated old house, and the cause of his remarks was a succession of sounds in the room below. Somebody appeared to be thumping around in an odd way, though not loud enough to arrest general attention.

Indeed, it is probable that the noise passed unheard by all except the boy, and he only noticed it because he had nothing else to do while his complaint was more humorous than anything else.

"Keep it up!" he added, encouragingly. "Thar ain't no use of nobody bein' bashful 'round Rag Alley. Even the cholera has rights here which ev'rybody is bound tar respeck. Bashful folks ain't no claim on these regions, which is pooty much given over ter rats, dirt, rags an' poverty.

He was certainly ragged, none too clean, and, manifestly, poor; while his name, if he was to be believed, was Rube Rat-trap.

An odd name it was, but all things were odd in Rag Alley—all but poverty.

"Still 'thumpin' l!" quoth Rube. "Takin' his promenade, I guess, though his step seems a hair irregular. Can't be he's a West P'nt gradoote. Solomon Sinn! That's his name, 'cordin' ter all accounts, but ef it was mine, I'd change it, by Jerusha! A man whose name is Sinn gives hisself dead away first off."

An old man named Solomon Sinn had moved into the room below a few days before, and he it was, presumably, that was doing so much thumping.

"Keep on, Solomon," the boy added, as he rose to leave the house. As he passed Solomon Sinn's door he heard a rattling as though a chair was being moved, and then a squeaking as though Sinn was climbing up into it.

"Queer blade, he is; but 'taint none o' my biz!"

With this verdict Rube continued his way and was soon in Rag Alley. That is the name to be used here, but it is not the one rightfully belonging to the place; as many who lived there "sailed under false colors," so may the alley pass under mask in these pages.

It was not a pleasant spot. Some yards away was a busy, noisy, dirty, but semi-respectable street. Rag Alley was dirty, but not respectable as to appearances or inhabitants. It was a narrow gap between tall brick buildings which, judging from appearances, suffered from a mixed complaint—dilapidated old age and a recent case of small-pox, so battered and disfigured were the edifices.

Go there at almost any time, and you would see ragged men sleeping off a late debauch in the doorways; ragged women gossiped with each other, and ragged children played or fought, as suited their turn of mind.

At the particular time when Rube emerged from the house the alley was not keeping up its reputation. It was supper-time, and the usual crowd had gone to eat, or elsewhere; and only a few very small children remained visible.

Down the alley from the street came a man of middle-age. He was a short, broad, hearty-looking person who wore a full sailor-suit, but everything was not in ship-shape with him. He was obviously, thoroughly drunk, and he rolled about and lurched in the trough of the drunkard... until his top-gallant mast bade fair to

bump against quarter-deck at any time, so to speak. In other words, his head and heels seemed reluctant to keep at proper distance from each other.

Rube watched his erratic movements with grave interest, but the sailor finally came to a halt and tried to survey the buildings on the west side of the alley.

This proved difficult, and he nearly lost his footing, but ingenuity helped him out. He went to the opposite side, leaned against the wall and found the support sufficient.

"Fine view, mister!" observed Rube.

"Ay, ay, my hearty!" the sailor bluffly agreed.

"Thinkin' o' buyin'?"

"How's that?"

"Goin' ter buy the block?"

"Avast, there! I'm no millionaire, an' ef I was I'd buy real-estate on the ocean, not on land."

"Taxes less, I da'ssay."

"Eh?"

"Land cheaper thar, ain't it?"

"I'd buy a ship."

"I understood ye afore. Should say, hows'er, that a land-tenement would do fur you. You could beat a ship out on the wobble, an' never turn a hair."

The sailor turned partially around and looked sharply at his companion.

"What's yer name?" he asked.

"Rube Rat-trap."

"What ye givin' us?"

"Fact, by Jerusha!"

"Nobody ever had a name like that."

"Don't call names, Jack Foulweather; don't call me 'nobody.' It ain't perlite, though it may be owin' ter your bringin' up. My fam'ly is respecterble, all on 'em—human, rodentikil an' feline—the Rat family is. Few like us, an' we ain't like nobody else. We are queer, the Rat fam'ly is; big an' little, great an' small. I'm proud o' my name, an' I'm a Rat no cat kin ketch!"

Rube threw back his head, expanded his chest in pride, and nodded gravely at the sailor.

"Who's yer father?" the questioner continued, winking hard in an effort to keep his eyes open.

"Ain't got any. Now, don't go on with that katerkism. I'm painfully destitoot of parients. I may hev had six mothers an' four fathers rigernally, but I can't prove it. Mister, I'm—What yer name?"

"Asa Frink."

"Good name, my friend; good name. "Wal, as I's about ter say, I'm an orphian an' a widder, all in one. I hev no parients, no wife, no husband an' no children. Ef that ain't a bereavement, Asa Frink, what is?"

The sailor felt that he had met with a melancholy case, but his mind was not clear and he could not fully grasp the situation. He shook his head slowly and changed the subject.

"D'ye know 'Siah Parsons?"

"No."

"Don't live here, now, eh?"

"No."

"He did twenty years ago."

"I've heerd it said one tenant moved out sence then," Rube grimly answered.

"Know Peter Andrews?"

"Not any."

"Amasa Briggs?"

"No sech men 'round Rag Alley, messmate."

"Things hev changed sence I was in New York afore!" sighed Frink.

"How long ago was that?"

"Twenty years."

"There has been one or two changes sence then."

"That house is No. 7, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"That's the place!"

"What place?"

"He was killed there."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes—murdered; foully murdered!"

"Say, now, this grows interestin'. Murdered, eh? What fur?"

Frink shook his head.

"That's a long story."

"S'pose they hung the 'sassinator!"

"That they didn't; the scoundrel escaped."

"Perleece wa'n't no good, then, hey?"

"They never heard of it."

"Never heard on't! Why not?"

"Hushed up. When Old Nick had his trial, an' was throwed out o' good quarters, 'tain't likely he give evidence ag'in' himself."

"I think I ketch on ter the p'int. This mur-

der wa'n't ginerally knowed, an' 'twas kep' mum."

"Ay, ay; that's it."

"Wal, ef you knowed it, why didn't you tell? Was you the 'sassinator?"

Asa Frink turned two bloodshot eyes upon the boy.

"You're too sharp, sonny," he returned, in ill-humor. "Don't be pokin' your nose into other folkses affairs!"

"Why not? It's the natur' of a rat, an' natur' will bubble when thar's a fire under the kettle. Bein' a Rat, I can't help pokin' my nose inter ev'ry corner."

"I guess you mean well. Say, is that house full?"

"Number seven?"

"Of course."

"Not above the ridge-pole."

"Don't be too funny. I want ter hire a room."

"There is one ter let at Number Six."

"It won't suit. Seven is the place I want, an' I'll hev it, d'ye mind, ef I pay ten dollars a week fur a closet!"

"Whe-ew! Want ter be in whar the murder was done, do ye? Funny taste!"

"You live there, don't ye?"

"I do; an' I'd be right glad ter hev you fur a neighbor. Excuse my p'inted remarks, ef I've made any, fur I like your build, Jack Foulweather—I do, by Jerusha! I guess you an' me could git along as good-natured as two buckwheat cakes!"

"That's frank and hearty, Rube—"

"Rat-trap is the t'other part; so-called 'cause I live in a rat-trap. Make it Rat-trap Rube, ef you want ter; I don't keer."

"You're a good feller, Rat-trap; I know that ef I be half-seas over. Now, see here—I want ter speak ter you sorter private-like! I've got a secret ter tell!"

Frink looked cautiously around, to be sure no one was listening, and nearly lost his balance in doing it. Then he turned again to Rube with tipsy confidence.

CHAPTER II.

ASA WANTS A ROOM.

THE sailor leaned heavily against the wall and blinked rapidly in an effort to keep Rube's face visible to his watery eyes.

"What room d'ye bunk in, messmate?" he asked.

"Number 99."

"There ain't that many rooms in the hull ship."

"They ain't numbered consecutively; but ef you'll look on my door you'll see '99' done thar in black. Artist was R. Rat-trap, Esquire; done with a coal."

"Ay, ay! Where's the room?"

"Third floor, front; side room."

"Hal! Who has the big room under ye?" eagerly demanded Frink.

"Solomon Sinn."

"Never heard of him."

"He's a thumper!"

"A what?"

"A queer old blade. Never mind, though; go on!"

"I want that room!"

"With Solomon?"

"No, by Neptune! He must move out."

"S'pose he won't go?"

"He must, an' shall. Shiver my timbers! I'll throw him overboard ef he don't!"

"There is other rooms; good ones, too, that—"

"They won't do; I must hev Sinn's room, an' I'm goin' ter have it. He's poor, ain't he? But of course he is, or he wouldn't herd in that old ark. A hog wouldn't live there ef he was fed on honey off of gold dishes. Hang it! the house was older than Methuselah when I knowed it, an' it looks fit ter fall inter sawdust now with age an' dry-rot. Sinn is poor, an' when I offer ter pay him fur movin' out, out he'll go on the jump. Then I'll move in an'—"

Asa Frink checked himself abruptly. Evidently he did not want to utter what was in his mind.

"Was that room connected with the murder?" Rube asked, gazing at the sailor critically.

"Was it? Was it? Oh! no; not by any means. Who said so?"

Rube smiled. Asa was not sharp enough in his present mood to manage affairs well, and his sudden trepidation was the best possible proof that the crime had been done in the room, or near it.

"Nobody said so, Jack Foulweather. I was only in hopes it wa'n't, fur I wouldn't like ter sleep over it."

"It's all right—all right. Don't be afraid. The murder was done in the—the basement."

"All right, Jack."

"I mind the night well; a bad night, too. The wind was blowin' off-shore, an' the masts creaked when the wind kethched the old house dead on her port side. Every timber was on the strain, an' there she was anchored, with no chance ter run afore the wind. That was the night, an' he lay there in that room about as sensible as the Rock o' Gibraltar. Rum did it, or he'd never 'a' b'en there. Rum brought him down, an' he's no more able ter look out fur himself than a baby."

"An' they killed him?"

"Ay, ay!"

"In his sleep?"

"No; he woke up."

"Twas a mean thing ter do."

"Twas a cruel, dastardly thing ter do, Rat-trap, an' don't yer forget it. Why, lad, I've been a sailor thirty good year, an' I've seen rough sights in some foreign ports; but never one that's ha'nted me like that. Ay, ay, lad; it's ha'nted me. Many's the time I've laid in my bunk in fair weather an' foul, with the old ship a-scuddin' afore a good breeze, or laborin' in a gale, an' thought on't ter my sorrier; an' thar's b'en times, messmate, when the craft seemed goin' down inter Davy Jones's Locker, that I've see'd his ghost a-standin' in the riggin', an' beckonin' me ter come with him. I hev, by Neptune!"

Frink took off his cap and wiped from his brow perspiration which was not called there by the general temperature.

Old scenes revived moved him, and he manifested nervous regret and uneasiness.

"But you didn't kill him?" asked Rube.

"Never, lad! I wouldn't 'a' harmed a hair o' his head!"

"It was never found out?"

"No."

"What was done with the body?"

"I never knowed. City sharks know how ter dispose o' sech things."

"What become o' the man who killed him?"

Asa Frink suddenly straightened himself. His expression changed, and he looked at Rube suspiciously.

"What's that?"

"Who killed him, an' where did the killer go?"

"Boy, you talk too much!"

The sailor had been indulging in confidential talk brought on by intoxication only, and, alarmed at his own imprudence, he now made a laughable attempt to act with dignity.

Rube, however, had no thought of laughing. The room of the old house which had Solomon Sinn for an occupant had suddenly become imbued with a new interest. A crime had been committed there; a secret was connected with the crime; and, for some mysterious reason, Asa Frink wished to move into the room.

Why was it?

The boy did not lose his usual shrewdness, and once more he set out to pacify his new acquaintance.

"Hope you'll 'scuse me, Jack," he respectfully replied, "but I was always a great case ter like stories."

"You do, hey? By Neptune! I'll give ye a dose some day. Why, lad, I've sailed this measly world all over, fore an' aft, hull an' riggin', quarter-deck an' forecastle; an' the strange things I've seen would make yer eyes roll out like two pineapples!"

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, I do."

"I'll have ter hear 'em some time."

"You shall, Rat-trap, you shall. Shiver my timbers! but I've took a fancy ter you, an' when I locate in this house, I'll spin ye yarns that'll make yer blood stand on end an' yer hair grow cold. I'll hev ye down in my room—no; I'll go up in *your* room."

Asa broke off again. Somehow, the room which he covetted so much, and of which he intended to deprive Solomon Sinn, exercised a strong influence over him, and it was clear that he had some reason for not wanting Rube in that room.

His conduct perplexed the boy a good deal.

"Now, le's have a drink!"

Frink spoke heartily, but suddenly checked himself.

"Hang me! I forgot you's a boy!" he added. "May Davy Jones get me when I lead a boy in wrong ways. Lad, let whisky alone! It robs man o' his money, his judgment an' his brains—Say, you live here reg'lar, eh?"

The temperance sermon was suddenly forgotten in the pressure of a new idea.

"Yes, some," Rube answered. "I'm a citizen o' Rag Alley. Brought myself up here, though where I's born is a hefty conundrum. Can't solve it! Yes; I live here; I'm Citizen Rat-trap, o' Rag Alley!"

"Hang me ef you ain't a good 'un! Wal, see here, Rat-trap, I've talked pooty free ter you, eh?"

"I'm proud ter say you hev."

"Um! Wal, now, I hope you won't go an' tell all I've confided ter you?"

"Not by a mighty sight!"

"Good! good! You're a trump card, Rat-trap, an' I'm proud ter know ye. When we git housed under the same canvas we'll be great friends—ef you don't peach!"

Asa looked at his companion ever sharper than before, but Rube hastened to answer:

"Not one blessed word will I give away, Jack."

"That's the sort. I knowed you was a good 'un the minute I set eyes on ye. When I git this biz done I'm goin' ter git away ter sea ag'in, an' I'll take you with me, ef you say so. You needn't be afeerd ter trust me, for Asa Frink don't fill himself ter the muzzle with poor whisky every day."

"I should hope not, Foulweather; I should hope not. You don't look pooty with a jag on."

"That may be, but I've got ter fill up again. Saloon jest 'round the corner, ain't there?"

"Yes."

"Knew it, unless it had moved, for I sampled it when I come along. I'll h'ist a fresh cargo and then come back an' talk biz with Solomon Sinn. You'll introduce me, hey?"

"Yes."

"K'reck! By the way, ef anybody comes in here while I'm gone, an' asks fur Asa Frink, you swear you ain't seen a stranger about. Will ye?"

"If ye want me to, sartain."

"Good-by—good-by! An' ef them men come, jest keep yer weather-eye open. They're tough cusses, an' the Spaniard might take a fancy ter knife ye. He carries that weapon, an' he's waitin' fur a chance ter give me the blade, fair or foul."

"Kill ye?"

"That's their lay. Every blessed minute them sharks are on my track, on murder bent. You see, they're afraid I may blow on what was done in Rag Alley twenty year ago. Look out fur them ef they show up, especially the Spaniard with the knife; he's a bad 'un. I'll git a drink an' come back in a shake."

Frink walked away with a "roll" in his gait which was not all the result of long experience on a ship's deck.

A moment later he entered one of numerous saloons in the vicinity, this particular one forming a popular rendezvous for jolly tars ashore on a spree.

The throng within formed a motley company, including a rough character seated at one of the rude tables who watched old Frink the sailor closely as he ambled up to the bar.

As the sailor disappeared from view Rube sat down to await his return.

He was more than willing to help Asa along in his work. The reference to the old-time trouble at Number Seven, with the attending mystery and murder, had aroused all of the Citizen's interest, and, believing that the sailor wanted possession of Solomon Sinn's room to work out some important end, he was bound that Asa should be located there, if possible.

Rube made a living by doing odd jobs, and as no job was on hand just then, he thought he could in no way better employ himself than by "freezing" to Asa, as he expressed it.

Several minutes passed. Rube had kept no run of the lapse of time, owing to the fact that he had been doing so much thinking, but the idea finally impressed itself upon his mind that Asa was very slow about returning.

"He's forgot that he went fur *one* drink, I guess, an' is prob'ly standin' up ter the bar an' jest loadin' himself. That won't do; I must stop it."

Rising, the Citizen walked toward the saloon. The street beyond Rag Alley was no longer the bustling thoroughfare of an hour before. Business hours were over, and only a few hurrying pedestrians and belated trucks were to be seen.

There was no sign of Frink.

Rube walked into the saloon; Frink was not there.

The barkeeper knew Rube, as he did every one around Rag Alley, and as Rube had never been a saucy boy, the dispenser of fluids had a good opinion of him. He had never seen the boy in the saloon before, and he spoke in a

friendly way.

"Well, Rat-trap, what're you looking for?"

"The sailor-chap."

"The one who nearly got his head broke?"

"How's that?"

"There was a sailor in here a bit ago, and he had a rusty time. Other men pounced on him, and he got laid out!"

CHAPTER III.

A SHARP OLD MAN IN RED.

RUBE became interested at once.

"What's that you say?" he asked.

"Jack Tar came to grief in here, and I thought he would get badly done up, but it seems it was all right—at least, so the men stated.

The barkeeper's tone was one of some doubt.

"Who was the men? Shall be glad ter hev you eloocidate fully, fur he was a frien' o' mine."

"Who was he, anyhow?"

"Can't jest say. I made his 'quaintance in the classic precepts o' Rag Alley, an' he was ter come back ter me there."

"I don't reckon he'll come, Citizen. He's been robbed and carried off in a hack."

"The dickens, you say!"

"Fact! He came in for a drink, and I mixed him up a mild one, for I saw he had a glorious jag on already. He was still at it when in came three other men. Your sailor knew them, and backed up in a corner where he could face them; and then they all went at him for keeps. He knocked the first down, clean as a whistle—"

"Bully fur him!"

"But they were too much for him. A man with liquor in ain't good for much, and with three against him, your sailor went down. One of the gang, a sort of Spanish-looking fellow—"

"How's that?"

"One of them looked to be a Spaniard."

"Hum! Go on!"

"The Spaniard actually drew a knife, but another fellow was ahead of him; he give the sailor a crack over the skull with a club, and brought him down in a jiffy. Then two of them lifted their game and carried him out, while the third stopped to give me an earache."

"What did he say?"

"Said he was acting for the sailor's folks."

"Gammon!"

"Think so?"

"Wal, it ain't brotherly nor sisterly ter knock him down with a club."

"The other fellow said that Baker—"

"Who's Baker?"

"The sailor."

"Hum! Go on!"

"He said Baker was a right good fellow when in his right mind, but a perfect cyclone when loaded up with whisky. He tried to thrash his old father this morning, strangled his sister's pug-dog, and then cleared out. The family knew he would bring up in a police-station—he always does when he gets on a tear—so they sent the three men to gobble him, take him home and get him sobered up; all done to keep him from being arrested. Knowing persuasion would be of no use, the men dropped on him bold and heavy, first off."

"Did you b'leeve all that?"

"Well, I hardly know."

"But you didn't interfere?"

"No. I've learned to keep out of other men's fights. I don't want *my* head broken, while as for calling the police, if I did that when rows occur, I'd have all Rag Alley locked up inside of two days."

"They be fighters," Rube admitted, "but this is a different case. So they took the sailor away in a hack?"

"Yes."

"Which way did they go?"

"East."

"Did ye know the hackman, or see any number?"

"No."

"Did the sailor speak durin' the scrimmage?"

"Yes. He was plucky, and he said no gang of cut-throats could best him."

"Was that all?"

"All he said was to that effect."

Rube had gained all the information he could. He asked more questions, but they did not develop anything of importance. He went outside and stood looking soberly down the street. Asa Frink was gone, and he knew of no way to find him. Who the sailor was, really, where he had come from and where he belonged, Rube

did not know; and as he had lately come in from a voyage, it might not be easy to trace him even with the most zealous efforts.

Of course the story told to the barkeeper was wholly false. Frink had been captured by his enemies, and from what he had said, his prospects did not look bright. The Spaniard—the man with the knife—against whom Asa had spoken so forcibly, was on the scene, and Rube would have been glad to know that the sailor's life was not in danger.

"He said they was on his track, on murder bent; an' that the Spaniard was waitin' fur a chance ter 'give him the blade!' Whew! he has fell inter a mighty bad fix, an' I'm afeerd I've seen the last o' my sailor pard!"

Remembering that Frink had said those men sought his life because they were afraid he would tell what had happened, years before, at Number 7, the house suddenly became of new interest.

The boy walked back and entered.

As he went up-stairs to his own room he paused for a moment at Solomon Sinn's door. All was silent inside, but a lamp had been lighted.

Citizen Rat-trap had never seen the inside of that room, but, feeling sure that it was there that the crime of long ago had been committed, he was tempted to rap, make some errand with Sinn, and so have a chance to look around.

Resisting the temptation, he went to his own room and sat down at the window. From that point he could keep the watch for Frink he had promised to make, and this he determined to do, useless as it seemed.

In a short time those who lived in Rag Alley came out for an airing, great and small, and dirty children tumbled over each other while their dirty elders gossiped, joked, argued and quarreled. All this was an old story in Rag Alley, but Asa Frink did not return to make a new feature.

After some time sounds were again to be heard in Sinn's room. The old gentleman had been resting, but he began to tramp around, and, now and then, the thumping which had attracted Rube's attention before was renewed, but it sounded only at rare intervals, and did not seem to have any system.

Rube was of the opinion that Sinn would be able to keep the room as long as he wished. Asa Frink was not likely to come back.

This again suggested an inquiry: Why had Frink wanted the room, anyhow? If a crime was committed there in former days, it seemed to be just the reason why any one who knew of it should want to keep away.

At the end of an hour Citizen Rat-trap went out of the house. He had given Frink up, but the sailor's case had lost no part of its interest.

He left the alley and walked down the street in the way his kidnappers had gone, keeping a sharp lookout. He saw no one who had connection with the case, as far as he knew, and when he finally returned home it was with the impression that Asa had gone out of sight permanently.

Rube was young and he was tired, and when once he was in bed he did not lie awake a great while to think about the sailor or any one else.

He fell asleep and put in a good night's rest.

The first thing he was conscious of in the morning was a sharp rapping at some point, and as he became fully awake he realized that some one was knocking at his door. It proved to be one of the female tenants of the house, and when he had thrown on his clothes and shoved back the bolt he gained view of her.

"Are you the Seven Sleepers?" she tartly asked.

"No; I'm only three on 'em."

"I nearly knocked the door down!"

"Did it hit back?"

"Come, Rat-trap, none o' your nonsense. I've come on business."

"Heave ahead, Mrs. Odjacks!"

"Do you want a job?"

"I'm pinin' fur one."

"As a nurse?"

"As a which?"

"Attendant on a sick person."

"Wal, lemme see! I ain't had no 'sperience, but the Rat family take naturally ter all good an' glorious work. Ef the sick chap ain't got yeller fever, cholera, small-pox or toothache, I'm his huckleberry; but I drawr the line at ketchin' complaints."

"Solomon Sinn has fell and hurted his hip so he can't move, an' he wants a smart boy ter take care o' him. He said—"

"Don't look furder, Mrs. Odjacks; I'm the quadruped fur the job!" Rube asserted.

"Enough said. Come right down."

Citizen Rat-trap was in high glee. Here was a chance to see the inside of the mysterious room in which the crime had been committed, and he did not intend to let the chance slip. He concealed his joy as much as possible, and followed demurely after good Mrs. Odjacks.

They found Solomon Sinn in bed—an odd, little old man with a wrinkled, emaciated face and a beard fit for a patriarch. He had a hooked nose, and deep-set eyes which were very bright and keen. He proceeded to spear Rube, as it were, with his sharpest glance.

"So you're the boy?" he began, firing off each word like a rifle-shot.

"I'm the boy," Rube agreed.

"Are you smart?"

"My fam'bly think so."

"Do they live here?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"The rats. Them is the only fam'bly I hev, an' they are here in super-abundance. You kin hear them scamperin' around like mad ev'ry night. Human folks I ain't got; I'm an orphian an' a widder!"

"Hum! hum! hum!" muttered the old man, sharply, and neither by his speech nor his expression could Rube tell whether he was pleased or angry.

"I sha'n't hev no 'follerers,'" the boy added.

"Can you mind your own business?"

"Always have done so."

"I don't want a boy whose tongue will run like a locomotive the instant he leaves me."

"I'm a mum chap, boss."

"What pay do you want?"

"What you think is right."

"I'll give you your board and three dollars a week."

"All right."

"I'm a cripple just now. I received an injury to my hip last night, and the rheumatism has got into it the worst way. I can't get out of bed, and I can't stir. I suffer a good deal of pain, but that is my business—"

"I've been tryin' to have Mr. Sinn have a doctor—"

Thus far spoke Mrs. Odjacks, but Sinn interrupted sharply:

"I won't have a doctor! Don't you mention it again, or you shall leave the room. Now, boy, I want you here to help me; hand me things; run errands; make my coffee; and, if you know how, read. The job will last until I get over the effects of my fall."

"Thank you. I shall be glad ter take it. I'm grateful, though sorry you fell. How'd you happen ter tumble?"

"None of your business!" fiercely returned the old man. "Haven't I a right to fall, if I want to?"

"You hev, by Jerusha!"

"Then say no more about it. I won't have cheap talk; I'll fire every soul of you if you make yourselves obnoxious. I run this room, and I won't have obnoxious folks around. Folks who deal with me must mind their own business! Do you clearly understand that?"

CHAPTER IV.

RUBE DISCOVERS A MYSTERIOUS BOX.

MR. SOLOMON SINK glared at his companions as though he would like to bite their heads off, but the boy applicant was neither frightened nor angry.

"I ketch on," he replied, with perfect good humor, "an' I approve o' all you say. Your principles is k'reck, an' you will find me ready ter back ye up in ev'ry way. Bein' my boss, your way will be the way I must go, an' I'll do it!"

"You're a sensible boy. What's your name?"

"Rube Rat-trap."

"What?"

"Queer name, ain't it? Wal, it's the only one I hev. Rube Rat-trap; otherwise, the Eminent Citizen o' Rag Alley. As I said afore, I'm an orphan an' a widder, an' what relatives I hev, run over the house with four feet, 'stead o' two. Takin' the hull batch, human, rodentikel an' feline, big an' little, four-footed and two-footed, the Rat family is numerous. I hold my head as high as any on 'em, an' I'm a Rat no cat kin ketch!"

"Boy, you amuse me!" declared Solomon Sinn.

"Sometimes I amuse myself."

"I think we shall get along well together."

"I sha'n't quarrel, ef you don't."

"Mrs. Odjacks," added Sinn, "you can go. You are a good soul, and I will try to reward you later. In fact, if you will do the more intri-

cate part of my cooking, while I am ill, I will pay you well—"

"Dear, dear soul!" pronounced Mrs. Odjacks, "don't mention it. My heart worms ter the needy an' deserving, and what I can do shall be done cheerfully. The woes o' my brother men touch my heart to its innermost inside, an' as Parson George says, 'Him who helps her neighbor is nobler than a queen!'"

"That'll do!" hurriedly declared Solomon. "Sermons won't stay my stomach, but food will. Go and prepare me some right away!"

Mrs. Odjacks was too good-natured to be offended, and she took her ponderous form out of the room.

"That woman is a fool!" Solomon deposed, curtly.

"She's good-hearted."

"That's why she is a fool!"

It was very clear that Mr. Solomon Sinn was a cynic of the worst kind, but Rube cared nothing for that. He had moved on a step in his work, and as he suspected that his new employer's "bark was worse than his bite," to use a homely expression, he had no doubt of his ability to get along with the injured man all right.

Sinn had several things that he wanted done in the room, and he proceeded to give directions at once. Rube did the work, and, somewhat to his surprise, his employer did not find any fault.

While thus occupied, Citizen Rat-trap had opportunity to use his eyes also, and did not neglect the chance.

The room was of good size; much larger than any one but a rich man would think of building at the present day; and it was queer and peculiar in many ways.

Reference has before been made to the fact that the whole building was very old. Age showed plainly in Sinn's room. It was made and finished in an odd way, and many years had passed since any change had been made. There was a huge closet at one side, from which the door was gone, and a corner cupboard of the good old style made a novelty. Neither paper nor plastering covered the walls; they were of plain boards, and very much out of symmetry, at that.

It was a quaint room, but nothing was visible to explain why Asa Frink had been so anxious to get possession of it.

Rube's thoughts went back along the course of years, and he could not but wish the room had a voice of its own, to tell the story of the crime alluded to by the sailor.

The Citizen imagined another bed and another man lying there, and he seemed to see the victim of that mysterious crime, but imagination could go no further.

How had the deed been done?

Who had done it?

What had been the object?

These questions he could not answer, but he cordially wished that Solomon Sinn was a hundred miles away, and that Asa Frink had the room. But why was Asa so eager to get it?

There was but one explanation which a sharp boy could arrive at—there was something there, or believed by Asa to be there, which he wanted. Rube glanced at the big closet, the corner cupboard and the boards of the wall. If any one wished to hide anything in the room, it could be done easily. Probably a board could be removed without trouble, and there might be quite a recess behind.

The Citizen began to feel a fever for searching the place, but it needed only one good look at Sinn to assure him that nothing could be done while those sharp eyes were about.

Mrs. Odjacks soon came up with the breakfast. It proved good, and Sinn was not ungrateful. He expressed his satisfaction both in words and by means of grunts, and he made a good meal in spite of his condition.

In order to eat he had to have his head raised, and this was effected by means of pillows. Mrs. Odjacks had her opinion of how this should be done, but Sinn had his, also, and he had his way.

He gave his orders, and they had to obey to the letter.

It was Rube who had lifted his head and shoulders, and while doing this the boy had felt something hard under the feather-bed. (The latter abomination, which few persons are able to tolerate, had been brought to the house by Sinn, and was his particular pride.) Under this feather-bed was something hard, and Rube nearly cleaned the skin off from his fore-arm by running against some sharp corner.

While Solomon ate, Reuben thought.
What was under the feather-bed?

The Rag Alley Citizen had a lively imagination, and he at once decided that Sinn was a miser; that the object in the bed was a box; and that the box was full of money. In support of this theory was the fact that Sinn had been so particular when being lifted; that he would allow only Rube to do it; and that he had given particular directions just where the Citizen should place his hands.

All this seemed important, and Rube determined to test the matter.

Sinn finished eating, and said that he would lie down again. Rube lowered him, but not according to orders. The boy slyly slipped one of his hands under the feather-bed, and in a twinkling he had confirmation of his idea.

There was a box secured there!

Sinn was fixed easily; Mrs. Odjacks retreated; and employer and employee looked at each other critically. The Citizen was convinced that the man was a miser, and that a large sum of money was in the bed. He wanted to think of it; to dwell upon the bewildering fact; but he was given no time,

"How long have you lived around here, boy?" the injured man asked.

"Don't know."

"Were you born here?"

"Presumably."

"How old are you?"

"Ain't a ghost of an idee."

"What melancholy ignorance!"

"Mebbe; then ag'in, mebbe not. It's like this: Folks is fastidious 'bout their age. They hate ter tell, an' they don't tell. What then? They lie! What next? Why, lyin' is wicked, an' they git a black mark scored ag'in'em. Now, I don't know how old I be, so I can't lie. Is it reely a misfortune fur a kid not ter know how old he is?"

"You're a philosopher, I see."

"That ain't all. S'pose it was a disgrace, not a good thing, ter be ignorant o' when I's born. What then? Would I be ter blame? Presumably not. What kin you expect from a kid brought up in Rag Alley?—brought up in dirt, dark, ignorance, vice an' all the rest o' the black brood. That's me! Fur's I know o' my own 'sperience, the sun don't shine but one hour a day. 'Bout noon it climbs up nigh the roof o' the sky an' looks down inter Rag Alley, but I allow the sight o' rags, dirt an' whisky embarrasses it. The beamin' orb yanks the throttle wide open an' skips fur keeps. There be them, frien' Sinn, who sez the sun rises at mornin', 'stead o' noon, an' I've often thought o' goin' over ter some high p'int ter see. We don't see him in Rag Alley, but whisky, fights an' crime flourish right smart. Kin you blame a boy fur growin' up without knowin' much?"

There was no bitterness in Rube's manner, but there was a good deal of earnest gravity. He gesticulated with one hand, and laid down the way of life from his standpoint as he saw it.

Solomon Sinn's expression was strangely grave.

"And you have lived here all your life?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to school?"

"Never!"

"Can you read?"

"Quite flooently. Some years ago there lived in Rag Alley a poor woman—she died here, too—who took an int'rest in me. She teached me ter read an' write, an' ter figger sum. She was a good woman, an' I hope she's where poverty ain't known, now!"

The Citizen finished with an unconscious sigh. It was echoed by Solomon Sinn, but for some time no more was said. Finally the old man aroused from thought and abruptly asked:

"Did you ever know a man in Rag Alley named Peter Andrews?"

Rube started. Once before he had heard that question. Peter Andrews was one of the men inquired for by Asa Frink, and the coincidence was surprising.

"Never heerd o' him," the Citizen replied.

"Gone, long ago, no doubt; perhaps he is dead."

"Who was he, anyhow?"

"Oh! a man I've heard of."

"Lived in Rag Alley, eh?"

"Yes."

"In this house?"

"I don't know."

Sinn spoke impatiently, as though he did not want to say anything more about Peter Andrews, and then he changed the subject and sent Rube away on an errand.

It was not one of importance, but it took the boy Citizen away for an hour.

A surprise awaited him on his return.

CHAPTER V.

NEW-COMERS TO RAG ALLEY.

THE errand was done, and it was just nine o'clock when Citizen, Rat-trap entered No. 7 and went up to Solomon Sinn's room. There was a marked absence of etiquette at Rag Alley, and, having never been taught that knocking at another person's door was a necessary preliminary to an entrance, he walked in unannounced.

He had barely crossed the threshold when he paused in surprise.

Solomon was no longer alone. Two ladies were in the room, and one sat on each side of the bed. More than all the rest, these ladies were not residents of Rag Alley, but strangers to Rube, and wearers of fine garments which looked very much out of place in that locality.

Rube stood in uncertainty, but Sinn soon settled all doubts.

"Come in!" he directed. "Close the door and put your purchases down on the table."

All this the Citizen did promptly.

"Boy," continued the injured man, "these are females who have the misfortune to have me for a relative—Mrs. Sophronia Araminta Smith, and her daughter, Miss Violet Calla Flower-garden Smith."

His manner was grim and vicious, and the younger lady spoke in a horrified tone:

"Dear uncle, don't say that! There is no such thing as 'Flower-garden' in my name. It is plain Violet Calla Smith."

"Hum! hum! hum!" growled the old man; "it was a shame to slight the other posies! Sophronia, where were the lilacs, roses, pansies, daffadowndilly lilies-of-the-valley, and other hot-house plants, when you named your cherub? You showed reprehensible partiality!"

"You will have your joke, dear uncle!" murmured the elder lady.

"Hum! hum!"

"This boy is waiting to be dismissed, uncle."

"Is he? I think not; anyhow, he won't be dismissed. He's to stay here."

"But we can take care of you."

"So can he."

"But he is so ragged!"

"My beloved Sophronia," sneered Sinn, "take fifteen dollars from your pocket and send Violet Calla to buy a suit of clothes for him."

"But I haven't the money to spare."

"Then say no more about his rags. Rags! Why, rags are honorable! Honorable, mind you—honorable!"

Solomon glared at Mrs. Smith as though daring her to deny his statement.

"No doubt, uncle."

"Hum! hum! hum! Reuben, where is your watch?"

"Don't carry the article, sir."

"Hum! Get one the next time you go out. I'll foot the bill."

Mrs. Smith and Miss Smith looked at each other in dismay.

"Don't you think, uncle, you are able to be moved home?" sweetly asked Violet Calla.

"We should all be glad to see you—even the dog and the parrot—"

"Hang the dog and the parrot! If I had that despicable little wretch which you call a dog I'd blow his head off. Or perhaps he has no head; I never saw anything but hair and a nose."

"You are as facetious as ever, dear uncle."

"Hum! That's as near the truth as can be expected from a woman who keeps a dog. She never takes one of those half-pound abominations with her until her brain begins to soften!"

Solomon spoke fiercely, and his coarse gray hair seemed trying to stand on end.

"Dear uncle, don't excite yourself!" murmured Mrs. Smith, and she essayed to feel his pulse.

He snatched his wrist away viciously.

"Let me alone!" he exclaimed, snappishly. "I won't have any baby-work here. Do you see those two chairs over by the window?"

"Yes."

"Go and sit there—you and Calla Violet!"

Mrs. Smith looked at Miss Smith. Her glance was vicious, and it was plain that she would gladly have resented the order and the rude tone in which it was given, but she dared not. Quickly recovering her suavity, she arose.

"Just as you wish, dear uncle," she returned, sweetly.

Citizen Rat-trap had been an attentive observer and listener, and he had not failed to arrive at several conclusions.

Obviously, Solomon Sinn was not a man who need to live in such a miserable place as Rag Alley. The women were his relatives—he did not deny that—and they wore good clothes. To

dress as they did, they must have considerable money. They had come to see Sinn, and were bearing his severe treatment meekly. There was only one inference to be drawn from this—Solomon Sinn had a good deal of money, too. Hypocritical devotion to him was plain in all the women said and did, and only money could lead to such a thing.

For some strange reason Sinn had left good quarters and come to Rag Alley. Why had he done it? Any one who inferred that the old gentleman was wrong, mentally would soon find himself mistaken. That was not the explanation.

Why, then, had he come to miserable, noisy, dirty, tumble-down Number 7 Rag Alley?

Here was a conundrum.

As the women retired with perceptible bad humor to their new position, Sinn looked after them with a twinkle in his eyes which expressed great satisfaction. Then he turned his head.

"Reuben!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring a book here and read to me!"

The Citizen was to be put to a severe test. He had not been heard in this line, and Sinn had no means of knowing how he would acquit himself. As his only object was to worry the Smiths by showing a preference for the boy, he did not care. Rube did. He had a reputation to make, and was well aware that any failure on his part to do well would be a triumph for the Smiths.

These women he knew to be his enemies already.

Fortunately, he could read far better than was to be expected, and the book presented no serious trouble. He scored a success, and Sinn kept him at it for nearly an hour, while the women sat by and looked about as good-natured as two sore-headed bears.

Solomon derived a good deal of pleasure from it. He knew that they were angry at being put to one side while the boy in rags had the place of honor.

When the reading was over, Mrs. Smith came forward with a passable assumption of tranquillity.

"Do you know what quarters I can get here, uncle?" she asked.

"Quarter of what?"

"I refer to a room for Violet and myself."

"Don't know anything about it!" growled Sinn.

"Perhaps this youth can tell me?" Mrs. Smith suggested, growing more friendly.

"Mrs. Odjacks has general charge o' the house," Rube responded.

"Will you see her for me?"

Rube glanced at Mr. Sinn.

"Now, then, Sophronia, what do you want?" asked the old man, curtly.

"Rooms where I can stay near you until you recover sufficiently to be moved."

"Hum! Have I asked this of you?"

"No; but I know my duty. You are my uncle, and I am not going to desert you in the hour of your affliction."

"This is an affliction!" grimly commented the injured man, and it was obvious that he did not refer to his bodily troubles. "Sophronia, I won't trouble you; you can go home!"

"And leave you here, in sickness? Never, Uncle Solomon—never!"

"You never will go home, eh? Hum! I've often felt the same way. But who will care for the dog and the parrot?"

"Dear uncle, do not jest now. I am sincere in what I say; our devoted Violet and I must remain here until you are able to go home with us. We will secure a room and be near you."

"I suppose I must endure it!"

With this ungracious reply Solomon turned to Rube.

"Citizen," he directed, "go to Mrs. Odjacks and tell her a room is wanted. Beloved niece, do you wish one that is aristocratic?"

"The best the house affords!"

"Hum! hum! All modern improvements desired, Reuben—kerosene lamp, table with four legs, bed without too many missing slats, stove of an edition not later than 1710 A. D.; and so forth."

Violet looked appealingly at her mother, as though this list of "luxuries" dismayed her, but Mrs. Smith said nothing and Rube left the room.

"Ef we don't have some fun in there," he thought, "I'm 'way out o' my reckonin'!"

He found Mrs. Odjacks in her own rooms.

"Quarters ter let?" she repeated, in answer to his question. "Well, they're just in time. Giovanni Parenza has just left his room vacant an' started for Chicago. It's to let, but, land o'

love! what do them two high-fliers think they can do with that room? It's a mere ruin. Floor, walls an' all is goin' ter rack!"

"They want ter be nigh Solomon."

"They must love him."

"So a cat does hot soop."

"I don't think they'll take the room."

"They're sot on't."

"Runs in the fam'ly, I guess. Poor, dear Mr. Sinn was that way when he come, an' such an odd fancy as he had! You know that the room now occupied by Mr. Bartholomew Flynn is a very good room?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was vacant then, but it wouldn't suit Mr. Sinn; he wanted a front room, and said he'd pay a *bonus* ter any one who'd give up one to him. Mrs. Kazakofsky offered him hers, but it wouldn't do; he wanted ter look furder. Well, there was only Mr. Jules La Fontaine's left, an' when he was asked ter give it up he refused."

"He was a money-maker."

"I should say so, an' he got it. Sinn actually paid him twenty-five dollars ter move out. It was robbery, but Sinn was bound *an' determined* ter have that room. He'd taken a fancy to it, first off, an' he got it. I almost b'lieve he'd heerd of it before he come, for while the other rooms didn't seem ter please him, he brightened up at sight o' La Fontaine's, an' nothing could make him let up until he got it."

Rube gazed at Mrs. Odjacks in silence.

What was the peculiar attraction about that room?

Sinn had paid La Fontaine twenty-five dollars to move out, and only that day Asa Frink had said that he was ready to pay Sinn well if he would move out.

Clearly, the room possessed attractions—in the opinion of some—not visible to the eye.

Mrs. Odjacks accompanied Rube to Mr. Sinn's door, and the Smiths were then shown the vacant room. It had been made fairly clean, but it was so dilapidated that doubts might well be entertained of its safety. Mother and daughter shivered, but the room was duly engaged and a payment made.

They were bound to stick to Solomon Sinn, come what might.

There was grim enjoyment in the old man's manner as he asked, afterward, how they were pleased, and he seemed liable to get some fun out of life if he did have a disabled hip and an annoying case of rheumatism. The ladies evinced a desire to remain in his room, and it was evident they had suspicions that Rube was not a safe attendant—not safe for them—and Solomon did not oppose them. They remained.

Directly after noon there was another sensation.

CHAPTER VI.

SOLOMON ARMS RUBE WITH A CHISEL.

CITIZEN RUBE had his dinner, and then went to the drug-store on an errand. When he returned he saw two men before the door to Number 7. The door opened, and Mrs. Odjacks appeared just as Rube came up.

The men were roughly dressed, but it was noticeable that their hair, beards and hands were very well cared for, and one of the pair spoke very politely.

"Madam," said he, who is the janitor here?"

Mrs. Odjacks smiled.

"There ain't no such thing, but I have a sort o' care o' the place fur the owner."

"We want to hire a furnished room."

"The last one was let two hours ago."

"No vacancy?"

"No. It's a tenement-house, mostly, though there is five rooms let singly. Them is all full."

"How about the second floor front? We think that would suit us."

Rube began to be interested; "the second floor front" was Solomon Sinn's room.

"Man in it," replied Mrs. Odjacks.

"If we like the room we will pay him to move out."

Rube's eyes opened wide.

"He's sick."

The applicants both looked very much disappointed.

"How about the other rooms? Perhaps we can hire the occupants of these to leave."

"There is vacant rooms in the house across the way."

"Excuse me, madam, but we are not talking about the house across the way. We want quarters here. It seems to us a very desirable—that is, an airy place. If we can get a room we will remain almost anywhere until the sick man recovers, and then—Well, as we said, the house suits us."

At any other time Rube would have smiled at the idea of the old house suiting any one, but the fact that a swarm of folks were coming down to Rag Alley and making such strenuous efforts to get quarters in the front room of the second floor was too significant to be laughable.

What were they all after?

"You can see Mrs. Bartholomew Flynn, who has the room you may be able to get," explained Mrs. Odjacks. "She is a perfect lady, an' you an' her may be able ter come to some understandin'."

"All right, madam."

The men seemed relieved and walked in, while Rube followed slowly after and ascended the stairs.

"By Jerusha!" he muttered, "wish I owned this house. Could rent it fur prices ekul ter Murray Hill; though *what* in creation has started the racket ain't clear. Asa Frink wanted that one particular room fur the cheerful reason that a murder was done there once. Was that why Solomon Sinn wanted it, an' why these men want it? Ef I owned a house I'd advertise it an' say, 'A murder was once did init! Hi! how folks would flock in ter hire!'"

Rube laughed as cheerfully as though he believed that he had found the true theory. He did not believe it; he was shrewd enough to know there was a deeper cause.

"There is a certain thing that's missin', an' dollars ter doughnuts is a safe bet that they all think it is, or *may* be in that room. Now, what is it? Why, it's almost a dead sartainty it had some connection with the crime Asa spoke on. Jerusha! I'm a good mind ter buy this 'hull house an' pull it down fur the lost somethin'. I'm gittin' interested, by gum!"

His interest was not decreased when he learned, somewhat later, that the two strangers had secured Mrs. Flynn's room by paying her twenty dollars to move out.

It was clear again to her, for she merely carried her few portable goods across the alley on her own broad back, secured equally as good a room for the same price, and had the twenty dollars in her pocket. It is a melancholy fact that she put so much of the money into liquor that she was "not herself" for the next fortnight, but that is a foreign matter.

The men—they gave the names of David Green and Ezra Norton—moved in at once, and seemed as well pleased as though they were located in the best house of great New York.

During the remainder of the afternoon there was not much excitement, though there was scarcely a moment that did not have its interest for Rube.

Sophronia Smith and her daughter kept close to Solomon Sinn, though it is doubtful if they experienced much pleasure therefrom. He made no effort to send them away, though he did what was far worse to a sensitive mind. He lay upon the bed grim and watchful, and no chance was missed to make the women uncomfortable. He had no kind words for them, but his sarcasm flowed almost incessantly. From under his bushy brows he looked out cunningly at them, and his venomous shafts were sped unerringly.

All this they bore unflinchingly, though now and then a hostile glance betrayed them.

Obviously, they hated the old man, but were too prudent to say anything rash. Like a hawk watching for prey, they were not disposed to scare the victim until they had made sure of him.

Early in the evening they were banished from the room. Mr. Sinn stated that he wished to sleep, and they could not disregard that. Sophronia looked suspiciously at Rube, and suggested that he go, too, but Solomon replied that he "wanted help about his toilet."

That hint sent them off, whereupon Solomon smiled sarcastically.

"Were you ever out West, Rube?" he asked.

"No furder than Hoboken."

"Did you ever see a buzzard?"

Rube looked puzzled.

"Do ye mean a buzz-saw or a hornet?" he asked.

"A good deal of both. A buzzard is a bird of prey which scents game afar off, and when it's helpless, goes for it. Not caring to fight when there is danger, it hovers over the sick and wounded, waiting for him to get wholly helpless. That's what it likes to feed on."

"I see."

"Well, young man, if you ever get your eyes on a buzzard, or two buzzards, look out!"

Grinly uttering the words, which, plainly enough, were to be applied to the Smiths, Solomon turned his head and asked for his medicine. He took it, and then turned again to the boy Citizen.

"Rube, you've got a sharp face!" he remarked.

"All the Rat family have."

"How do you know, if you are the only one?"

"Because I'm an orphan an' a widder, it don't foller that I ain't got no distant rel'tives. Hark any night arter things is still an' you'll hear my cousins, sisters an' aunts go scamperin' through the house."

"Just so. Well, to resume: You look honest."

"Pearances is deceptive."

"Mightily so, young man; mighty so. Have often noticed that myself. Still, I think you honest."

"You can't tell; I ain't never been tempted. What credit is it ter a chap ter be honest ef he's never been tempted? I've knowed folks said ter be awful good, but, great Cæsar! they had never been tempted. Now, I hold that a pusson never tempted deserves no credit fur bein' good!"

"True Rat logic. Sharp, to the point, true."

"Beyond doubt."

"Well, I am under the impression that you are a boy to be trusted. As my employee, have you, or have you not, a right to tell abroad what you see here?"

"As long as you keep inside the limits o' law, I'd be a fool an' a rascal ter blow on ye."

"Tersely put. Well, my lad, I have work for you to do."

"All right."

"Go to the corner cupboard and find a chisel that is there."

Rube obeyed and soon had the implement.

"Find the fifth board from the corner—the upright boards in the wall."

Again Rube obeyed.

"Use the chisel and pry it off!"

Citizen Rube was surprised. He had not forgotten his theory that there was *something* concealed in or about the room which was desired by all the men who were after the occupancy of the room, but he had not expected to be taken into the game as an assistant. He was not too much surprised to delay work, and he ran the point of the chisel into a convenient crack.

"Use care, and make as little noise as possible."

"Correck!"

The boy had no difficult labor ahead of him. The boards which made the interior wall of the room were divided into two rows, broken midway by a horizontal line, and were so warped that many of the nails had already become loosened and lost.

Rube pried steadily, and with all the care Sinn could desire. He was greatly interested in the work, and, being anxious to know just what the lost article was, was prepared to do all he could to make the work a success. His employer watched his progress with manifest eagerness, and the scene became well worth looking at.

The board moved, and with a last effort Citizen Rube tore it entirely away. A black cavity was revealed beyond, but no more was to be seen.

"It's done," he announced.

"Take off the one next to it."

Once more Rube obeyed, and the work was soon done.

"Now," continued Sinn, "make a careful search in the vacant space. Look up and down, and to the rear wall, and let nothing escape your notice."

"What be I ter look for?" Rube inquired.

"Everything!"

"Don't see even a rat."

"Never mind; continue to look. Perhaps a folded paper is slipped into a crevice in the wall, or perhaps a diamond ring lies on the floor. Look for both, and look for all other substances. You say you are a rat with a sharp nose. Use that nose well and let nothing get away from you."

"O. K.! We'll hev a general upheaval, though I kin see more dirt now than anything else. Futur' developments may stir up a multitudinous supply o' curiosities, how'sever. We'll see!"

Rube went down upon his knees as readily as Solomon could wish, and the search for the unknown article was duly commenced.

CHAPTER VII.

SOLOMON PREPARES FOR TROUBLE.

The cavity proved to be too dark for reliable search, but when the lamp had been brought into use, Rube could see quite well. It did not take him long to decide that there was nothing

above, but on the floor was a great pile of accumulated dust.

All manner of valuables might be hidden there.

Citizen Rube had his opinion as to what the desired object was. Sinn had mentioned a "folded paper" and a diamond ring. That the latter article should be there Rube regarded as the height of absurdity, so he fell back upon the folded paper. His zeal was damped, however. If a paper, folded or otherwise, had been in that space ever since the old-time tragedy, it was not likely that much was left of it.

The four-footed rats of the house would not be likely to overlook it.

Saying nothing about his fears, Rube worked on. He moved the dust and, with supreme contempt of dirt, searched it thoroughly. He found nothing, and was at last obliged to turn to Solomon and make that announcement.

The old gentleman showed no disappointment.

"Tear off two more boards!" he directed.

"We'll soon have the hull house down."

"Never mind; it will give you a chance to speak to your four-legged relatives, the rats."

"They're powerful quiet, my cousins be."

"At supper, perhaps. Go on, Citizen!"

Rube obeyed. Two more boards were pried off, revealing the same old scene, and again he plunged into the dust. He was not more successful than on the former occasion; nothing rewarded his search.

The first two boards were replaced without much noise, the broken nails easily entering the old holes; and then two more were removed.

In this way the work went on until Rube had gone completely across one side of the room, but without finding any unusual object. Sinn could not, and did not, complain of a lack of care; Rube was too much interested to slight the work.

He put back the last board and turned to Sinn, but the old gentleman lay for some time in silence, his forehead knit in a thoughtful frown.

"We will let the matter rest for to-night," he finally remarked.

"I'll go on ef you say so."

"No. I wish I was able to help, though."

"I'll do whatever you say."

"You shall work at a future time, my lad."

"How about the closet an' cupboard?"

"I have looked there."

Rube suspected that he knew how Solomon had got the fall which had laid him up in bed.

"Did you lose the thing you want ter find?" cautiously inquired the Citizen.

"Hardly."

"This room seems ter be of ginal interest."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You ain't the only one who wants it."

Solomon turned his head quickly.

"Who else wants it?"

"Two chaps who moved in ter-day."

"Wanted this room?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I heerd them tell Mrs. Odjacks so, an' they said they would pay you ter move out an' let em have this room."

"Had they seen the room?"

"No."

"Then why did they want it so much?"

"That's what I don't understand."

"I want to know all about this. Tell me all!"

Obviously, Mr. Sinn did want to know all about it. He had become suddenly interested, as well as somewhat excited, and his sharp eyes were turned penetrately upon the Citizen. Rube was not reluctant to give what information he could about Ezra Norton and David Green. He did not intend to betray the fact that Asa Frink had declared a similar desire, but thought it well that Solomon should know about the other men.

He was questioned while he talked, and not only told the whole story, but gave an accurate description of Norton and Green. Sinn looked puzzled.

"What do these men want of my room?" he abruptly asked.

"Now you've got me."

"You are sure it was this room?"

"Sartain sure. Mrs. Odjacks tol' 'em that the man who had it was sick, an' they said they would wait until he got better, an' then pay him to move out."

"They will, eh? Well, perhaps I shall have something to say about that. I don't recognize these men by their names or your description."

"Prob'ly they are disguised in both respects."

"No doubt. Well, now they have got Mrs. Flynn's room, what are they going to do?"

"Wait fur you ter get well—"

"I doubt it."

Sinn interrupted abruptly, and the deeply-thoughtful expression did not leave his face. He glanced toward the door.

"A professional thug could open that door easily and without noise," he added.

Rube began to see his idea.

"That's a fack."

"I believe Norton and Green will try it."

"What do they want here?"

"It is not improbable that they would murder me, if they had a chance, though that is not what they want here," coolly returned Sinn. "Rube, how is your courage?"

"Tolerable, I guess. Try me, an' see!"

"Are you afraid to sleep in this room?"

"Be it! Well, I should say not. Sech weaknesses don't come nat'r'l ter the Rat fam'ly. I was left an orphian an' a widder at a tender age, both my parients havin' died sev'r'al months afore I was born, but I feel sure both on 'em were heroes. I mean ter hold up the fam'ly repertation, or git a big fall in tryin'."

"You may be tested right away. I don't know who Norton and Green are, but have no idea they will remain quietly in their room and wait for me to recover and give up my room to them—which latter I have no idea of doing."

"Should presoom not."

"The fellows are under this roof, and they will move promptly."

"Ter kill you?"

"To find what you have been searching for."

"I ain't got any idee what that is."

"I have. Well, to-night, unless I err, they will make an effort. Their scheme will probably be to enter here and drug me, or bind me by force, then search the place."

"I'll bet a bran'-new dollar—when I git one—that you won't agree to that."

"Their attempt will fail. I shall take measures to baffle and detect them."

Rube's eyes sparkled.

"By Jerusha! this is gettin' interestin'," he declared. "Mister, I'm your valet, an' it's my duty ter look arter ye. I hope you'll let me help murder ye—I mean, keep ye from bein' murdered!"

"You shall have your fill of excitement," Solomon promised, good-humoredly. "Do you think you can bring enough of your bed down here to suffice for a place to sleep, and keep your movements secret from every other person? Nobody must know that you propose sleep-ing here."

"Nobody shall, by ginger!"

"All right. Wait until the house gets a bit more quiet; then try it. One thing more."

"Yes?"

"Let nobody, least of all the Flower-garden Smiths, know about your search here. That must be kept secret as the grave."

"So it shall, by Jerusha!"

"Rat-trap, you impress me as being a boy whom I can trust, and you will find it to your advantage to serve me well. If I win my game here, and find that it is owing a good deal to your efforts, you shall be repaid in more than empty words."

"Wal, mister, I ain't goin' ter say I don't want it. The Rat tribe, human an' t'otherwise, is always greedy for good things—but that ain't ter the p'int. I'll do my very best ter help ye through all right."

"Enough said. Let me think, now, and see just how far we will go to head off Norton and Green."

Rube relaxed into silence, and Sinn gave considerable time to meditation. He finally aroused and directed the Citizen to go for his bed. Rube went, and succeeded in returning without any one being the wiser. He brought only a blanket and a rude pillow, but these, he declar-ed, were enough to make a bed for any one.

Preparations were then made for the night.

The room could have been made secure from intruders by simply moving some heavy article against it, but this was by no means what Sinn wanted. Satisfied that the suspected men would make a move against him promptly, he was anxious that they should show their hands at once.

Better hasten the crisis and have the suspense over.

Acting upon this idea, he arranged to give the men what he grimly called "a fair chance." The door was only locked because to leave it otherwise would arouse suspicion; but the key was removed so it would not bother the lock-pickers if they came.

"Now," said Solomon, "you are to sleep in

the closet, Rube, and have the lamp beside you with the wick turned low down, so it will positively give no light. Be prepared, however, to turn up the wick at a moment's notice, and spring out to light up the room."

"What'll you be doin'?"

"Dealing with the intruders."

"Won't they run?"

Solomon smiled grimly.

"Hardly!" he answered; and then he thrust his hand completely under the bed and brought out a dangerous-looking revolver.

"With this covering them," he added, "I fancy they won't try to run. If they do, I shall shoot to kill!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT THE LIGHT REVEALED.

CITIZEN RUBE began to realize that the night's work was not to be child's play. Solomon Sinn had taken time to think, and, plainly, was resolved to follow the course indicated, serious as it was. If the men came, and did not stand still when he told them to, he would drop them without mercy.

Now, Rube Rat-trap had not lived all his life at Rag Alley without becoming accustomed to rough scenes. He did not feel so much shocked as more carefully-reared boys would, but he looked at Solomon with some concern for that gentleman.

"Ef you shoot one on 'em thar will be a racket," he remarked.

"No doubt."

"You'll be taken up."

"All right."

"The law is pooty severe on fellers that shoot—"

"Are you a lawyer?"

"No."

"I am!"

The boy looked at Solomon with wide-open eyes for a moment, but as the belief that the old gentleman was telling the truth became fixed in his mind, he promptly replied:

"Jerusha! I ain't got no more ter say. I s'peck you're way up in legal biz, an' I ain't never studied any but in Rag Alley. I won't give no more advice, though the Rat family is nat'r'lly sympathetic."

"All right, young man; your good-will is known and appreciated. Now make your bed in the closet and turn in."

Rube did as directed, and by using due care with the lamp he managed to arrange it so that no light would shine out to betray them, yet a single turn of his hand would force the wick up.

A few minutes later all was dark and silent about the place.

The Citizen was under the impression that he would not, and could not sleep at all. He had become greatly interested in the course of events since Asa Frink approached him in the alley, and he was greatly excited to know what the result would be. He thought it all over for awhile, and then Nature prevailed over him—he fell asleep.

He dreamed.

He thought that the intruders had entered the room and overpowered him and Sinn; that the latter had, at their command, produced scores of bags of gold from the little box under his pillow, each bag being bigger than the box; that they were melting this gold in a huge caldron under which blazed a big fire; and that when Sinn declared there was no more gold, the rob-bers had turned in a rage upon him—Rube—and flung him into the caldron.

Rube awoke. He was not in a caldron, or near one, but it took him some little time to realize that there was no danger.

He had begun to grow sleepy again when he heard a slight click!

"Rats!" thought the boy.

Just then there was a sharp pull at his wrist. According to Solomon's orders he had attached a string there, the other end running back to the old gentleman's bed; and the pull at the string was a pre-arranged signal. It was a warning to Rube to arouse, and he was not slow to obey.

Quickly rising he put his head out of the closet.

There was no light, but his movements, faint as they were, had been heard by Sinn, and that person spoke in a whisper.

"They are coming!" he announced. "Lay low, and don't make a sound until I give the signal."

"All right!"

Rube answered cautiously enough, and then he stood still and listened. The "clicking" sound continued, but much fainter than before.

Except for the previous warning it might well have passed for the harmless movements of Rube's alleged "cousins," the four-footed rats; but the Citizen felt positive that the lock of the hall door was being skillfully tampered with.

The work went on—then there was a sudden, heavier sound, and Rube knew the bolt had been forced back.

Silence followed this achievement; the burglars were waiting to see if they had created any alarm. All the danger lay in the room, for rows were so common at Rag Alley, indoors and out, that a tremendous racket might occur without causing wonder.

A whole minute passed before operations were resumed; then the latch rattled the least possible degree and the door was softly opened.

The crisis was at hand.

Rube held his breath and watched and listened. He could see nothing, but a gentle rustling betrayed the entrance of at least two men, and he realized that they had approached Sinn's bed. Rube knew he had a revolver, but he began to fear for him. Then, suddenly, the slide of a bull's-eye lantern was drawn, and its light fell full upon Solomon.

The men were a moment ahead of him, but he was not disconcerted. Two sharp pulls of the string signaled to the boy, and the latter sent the wick of his hidden lamp shooting up.

The room became light, and a striking tableau was revealed.

At the front side of the bed stood two masked men, silent and motionless. The light of Citizen Rube's lamp showed a revolver turned full upon the intruders, and it was held in Sinn's unwavering hand.

That the old gentleman was thoroughly cool was revealed in every way, and his keen, cold eyes looked steadily upon the burglars.

"Stand where you are!" he uttered, in a low but distinct voice. "If you move a step I will shoot you as I would a mad-dog!"

Perhaps the men were dumfounded; in any case, they did not stir.

"Rube, close the door!" Sinn directed.

The Citizen moved quickly around and obeyed.

"Lock it, and remove the key!"

This was done, and a satisfied smile swept over the old man's grim face.

"Now we can talk in peace!" he added.

Rube returned to his former position, while the entrapped burglars looked at each other in manifest dismay. Solomon, however, was in good humor, and he continued to speak in a grimly sarcastic way:

"Gentlemen, sit down!" he commanded. "The hour is rather late for a call, but it shall never be said that I am oblivious to the demands of hospitality. Guests should always be cordially entertained, and you shall be. Sit down!"

The masked intruders had begun to recover their wits, but this fact brought no relief. The ugly-looking revolver still bore upon them, and a touch of Sinn's finger upon the trigger would be fatal to them. They were hopelessly in his power.

No movement had been made to obey his first invitation to sit down, but when the words rung out the second time they were sharp enough to make them seek chairs with dispatch.

"Now we can talk quietly," resumed the old gentleman. "I dare say you have come on business. What can I do for you?"

"You can let us go," suggested one of the burglars, finding his tongue.

"I can, but I shall not. What do you want here?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

"We made a mistake."

"What kind of a mistake?"

"We thought this was our room."

"Oh! and do you enter your room by picking the lock?"

"We thought it had got locked by accident—"

"Haven't you a key to your room?"

"No."

"I saw Mrs. Odjacks give one to 'em," put in Rube.

"We lost it."

"Oh! come, now, don't be so radically foolish!" directed Sinn. "Take off your masks!"

There was no movement toward obedience.

"I know you already," he added; "you are Ezra Norton and David Green."

"See here, old man, you are carrying things with too high a hand!" declared one of the men.

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"We won't submit!"

"No? What then? My revolver covers you, and if you make a hostile movement I will shoot

to kill. You have entered this room feloniously, and your lives are forfeit to me."

"We will break you in two—"

"Come and try it!"

Solomon looked calmly along the barrel of his revolver, and there was brief silence.

"One thing more," he observed; "you undoubtedly carry weapons. Let me caution you not to use these. If I see you drawing them I shall shoot!

"See here, old man, you're rough on us!" one of the burglars exclaimed.

"What do you expect?"

"We ain't harmed you."

"No; because I was ahead of you. You had just turned the light so you could see me, and would have pounced upon me a moment later. Oh! you are as innocent as doves!"

"Anyway, we demand that you let us go!"

"Softly, softly! You have not got what you came here for."

"What we came for!"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I am well aware of certain facts. You came to Number 7, Rag Alley, determined to hire this very room. When you got here you offered to pay me well to move out, and when you were told that I was sick, you said you would wait until I recovered, and then pay me to move out and let you in here."

"What of that?"

"A good deal. What do you want here? What attraction has this room for you?"

His keen, sharp voice seemed to put the men in a more uncomfortable mood than ever, and they looked at each other but made no reply.

CHAPTER IX.

A JUMP FROM THE WINDOW.

SOLOMON was not to be put off the track, and he sternly repeated his question:

"What attraction has this room for you?"

The burglar spokesman—his voice was enough for Rube to recognize Ezra Norton—braced up and replied:

"Captain, you have us on the hip, and we know enough to cave when we are down. The treat is on us, and we are ready to do the proper caper. Now, you can yourself state that we have not robbed you, eh?"

"Rather!"

"Good! You are nothing out, and you can be something in. We will pay you twenty dollars for liberty. Is it a go?"

"One condition goes with it."

"What is that?"

"I must see your faces."

Norton hesitated.

"You are a bit hard at a bargain."

"I ask no man to accept my terms."

"We will give you forty dollars to go without unmasking, but not a cent over twenty if you compel us to show our faces."

Sinn smiled scornfully. It was plain that he did not care a rush for the money, one way or another. The men had an impression that because he lived at Rag Alley a dollar would look as big as the moon, and forty dollars a good deal larger than the earth.

"I have heard," the old gentleman answered, "of women being paid ten thousand dollars to go on exhibition as beauties. Surely, when good looks come so high, you ought not to reveal your faces, and pay for the privilege, were it not to humor an invalid. My fancy is to have you unmask, and I will consider no proposition which leaves that part out."

"Will you let us go if we do unmask?"

"Yes."

"Will you swear to it?"

"Take my word or nothing," Sinn answered, irritably.

The burglar promptly removed his mask, and his companion followed suit. The faces of Norton and Green were revealed.

Sinn looked at them a long time in silence, studying their countenances closely, but finally shook his head slowly.

"Don't know you!" he admitted.

"Did you expect to?" Norton asked.

"Hum! I did not say. So you are the new lodgers?"

"Yes."

"As far as I have seen, you make friendly neighbors."

"It was all a joke—"

"No doubt; and it is immensely funny. Do you intend to live long in Rag Alley?"

"We hardly know."

"I would advise against it. The air is bad here, and we are so fastidious as to object to calls at one or two o'clock in the morning. In brief, gentlemen, when you leave this room you

must also leave the house. If I find you here in the morning, I shall have you arrested!"

"We will not trouble you."

"By which you mean you will go?"

"We will."

"At once?"

"Within ten minutes. We have a few things in our room; as soon as we can get these together we will leave the house for good."

"All right. Good-night!"

Sinn motioned to Rube to unlock the door, while Norton fumbled in his pocket and brought out a bank-note.

"To destruction with your money!" Sinn growled. "I am not going to burn my fingers with it. I presume there is blood and crime clinging to every grain of it. Get out and say no more!"

Citizen Rube had unlocked the door, and the burglars saw fit to disregard Solomon's severe remark and go while they could. They went, and Sinn motioned imperiously for Rat-trap to lock the door.

"Come close to me!" the old man then directed.

This was done.

"Boy, the time has come for you to show your mettle," Sinn continued, in a whisper.

"Dare you follow those men?"

"You bet!"

"They will soon leave the house, and it is likely that they will go to some lair. At any rate, they will put up somewhere for the rest of the night, and even if they go to a hotel, they will leave the way open for discoveries. They must be run down and their real names learned. Malediction upon the luck which puts me helpless in bed at this time! You, boy—you must act for me. I want you to dog them like an Indian on the trail!"

Solomon had become excited, and Rube caught the fever somewhat, though it required more than that to upset him seriously.

"I'll do it!" he quickly responded.

"When you have hived them, and learned all you can, come back to me. Wait! They may go to a hotel. If they do, go to South Fifth avenue—here is a card, the number and name are on it—go there and call up Mr. Jerrold. Tell him Solomon Sinn wants him to 'shadow' the two men. Do you understand?"

"That I do."

"If they go elsewhere than to a hotel, linger around until you are sure they do not come out after making a temporary stop, and then come back here. Understand?"

"Like a book!"

"Then get away, so the men need not escape you. How can you get out unheard by them?"

"Simple as duplex fractions. I'll drop out o' the winder!"

"It's too big a jump."

"Not an atom. I'm off!"

Making a dive for his cap Rube hastened to the window and raised it quickly but cautiously. He knew what he had been talking about when he spoke of jumping out. He had seen it done before then, and as the houses of Rag Alley were not noted for lofty rooms, he had full confidence that he would not be injured.

He squirmed through, agilely, turned and made a cheerful gesture to Solomon Sinn, and then dropped with care. Down he went, and the fall left him none the worse. He was considerably shaken, though the accumulation of dirt in the alley made a sort of cushion.

Recovering his balance he ran out of the alley, crossed the street beyond and ensconced himself in a convenient, deep doorway, there to await the appearance of his game.

Sinn had made no poor selection when he chose the Citizen to act as detective; Rube was shrewd and cool enough for any ordinary emergency.

Several minutes passed, and then he saw two men emerge from Number 7. They advanced, and when they were beyond the dark area of Rag Alley he saw that they were Norton and Green. They paused on the first side of the street.

"Homeless by night!" exclaimed Green, facetiously.

"You may joke if you want to," Norton answered, "but this cursed luck has made me mad!"

"Mad! I am furious!"

"Bah! you are too big a fool to see what we have lost. Baffled in our game we shall, of course lose the boodle that goes with it."

"That's the luck of war."

"It's the luck of that old fool in our coveted room."

"Call it that, then."

"Who is he?"

"Give it up."

"Did you mind that he said we come to Rag Alley with a fixed object?"

"Yes."

"And that he knew of our scheme to hire his room by paying him to move out?"

"Yes."

"How did he know this?"

"He was probably told by Mrs. Bootjacks, or whatever her name is."

"That may account for it, but I am not at ease. The way that old reprobate received us, and the cool, sarcastic, masterful way in which he handled things, worried me. I almost suspect that he knew of your coming, why we were there, what we wanted and—"

"Oh! come off, Ez! Don't go on in such a wild way. What should a Rag Alley beggar know about us, or care about us? You are too imaginative!"

Norton shook his head and did not reply. He seemed about to fall into deep thought, but Green impatiently added:

"Come! let's be off. We don't want a cop to fall on us, and the sooner we get to a hotel, the better."

"No hotel for me!"

"What then?"

"I'm going straight to our boss to report."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense!"

"Call it what you will. I am worried by this affair, and it is no more than right to let the boss know all. We have failed to get the old room, and our attempt to 'work it' has resulted disastrously. No great trouble may come of it, but a mental picture of that grim old man in bed keeps hovering around me. Somehow, I feel that he will be the means of doing us damage."

"You got an atom shaken up in there, Ez, and you are inclined to make a mountain out of a mole-hill. We can afford to laugh at the old man of Number 7, as completely as he ruled our destinies a bit ago. He is only one of the many toughs who infest Rag Alley; a place where everybody is on the shoot, and where human life is held mighty cheap. The old fellow isn't worth a second thought."

"Maybe not, but I think we ought to make our report at once."

"All right; let's do so."

The pair started off down the street, and after them went Rube Rat-trap. He had heard all this talk, and was elated at the prospect of discovering where their "boss" lived. If the head knave could be located it would be a very good job, and the Citizen was not forgetful of the fact that Solomon had promised to pay well for any important discovery.

CHAPTER X.

RUBE ADMITS THAT HE IS "THE BOY."

NORTON and Green walked away briskly, and Rube followed as skillfully as possible. At that hour there were but few persons stirring, which was against him, but, fortunately, there is never a time, by day or night, when there is not some pedestrian, belated by honest or dishonest causes, moving in the streets of New York.

Unless he was obliged to follow for a long time, the Citizen might be observed by the men and no suspicion aroused.

As they went on he was encouraged to see that they did not look around. Even Norton appeared to think there was no danger of pursuit, and Rube's work was rendered easy accordingly.

He was taken on quite a journey. The men walked rapidly, and it was some time later when they slackened their pace in front of a house on one of the streets east of the Bowery. The building was dark and silent. It was a large structure with the street in front and an alley at one side, but its character was hard to determine.

As it had once been a very fair specimen of architecture, and was now weather-beaten and dingy, rather than dilapidated, it looked as though it might possibly be occupied by some old-fashioned family of some financial means.

Norton rung the bell sharply.

The first pull did not produce any result, nor did the second or third, but the fourth had scarcely sounded when a window of the second floor opened. A white night-cap was plainly revealed, with a white beard under it.

"Who's there?" asked a peevish voice.

Norton made answer, and seemed to speak some name, but it was not that one by which Rube knew him, and the Citizen did not catch it. It was enough, however, to interest the man in the night-cap, for he spoke hurriedly.

"Wait!" he directed, "I will come down."

He disappeared; the window closed; there was a delay of a few moments, and then the door opened. Norton and Green entered; the door reclosed; the bolt clicked, and Citizen Rat-trap was on the wrong side, with all view shut off.

His first step was to go to the door and read the name on the plate.

"Banderson, eh?" he muttered. "That's o' some vally, I allow. When found, make a note on't. Jerusha! don't I wish I's in whar I could hear them chin?"

He retreated somewhat and watched for a light to shine out, but this did not occur.

"Gone ter a rear room fur their pow-wow," was his verdict.

His gaze turned toward the alley. This furnished a further means of observation, and the temptation to make use of it was strong. Solomon Sinn's directions had not included anything of this sort, but he knew that the more news he could bring, the better the old gentleman would be pleased. His decision was quickly made, and with light steps he entered the alley.

The rear of the house was soon reached, and it was not hard to locate the men. A light was burning in a room on the second floor. The window-shades were lowered, and all further view cut off, but it was a safe bet that Norton and Green were telling their story in that room.

Rube scratched his head mournfully.

"Wish I's in there, too!" he muttered. "Ef I could overhear the talk I could git onter the hull p'ison racket in a jiffy, I'll bet—an' wouldn't S. Sinn, Esquire, be jolly glad! Wal, I should observe!"

The Citizen looked the premises over. The house had a back-yard which could be gained easily, and it seemed a good point to be as near the secret as possible. The temptation was strong, and after a little thought he went for the fence. It was quite a scramble, but he gained the top and then dropped off and was in the yard.

All was quiet there.

He advanced toward the house, and when within a few feet of it, made a discovery. The basement door was open. This fact surprised him, and he stood looking at it thoughtfully, but he was only beginning on a series of unexpected and exciting events.

While he looked a woman suddenly appeared in the doorway, facing him, and he was so taken unawares that he could not run. She did not seem surprised in the least degree.

"Are you the boy?" she asked, in a matter-of-fact way.

Even a Sunday-school scholar could have answered that question without doing violence to his conscience or the truth.

"I am the boy," Rube agreed.

"You can come right in. Mr. Banderson did not expect you so soon, and has been lying down, but he will be glad to see you. Come in!"

There are times in all persons' lives when they act with more haste than judgment. Rube had one of those spells just then. He did not stop to consider but one feature of the case; he only remembered that he wanted to get into the house, and that a chance was vouchsafed. Promptly enough he entered, and the door was closed and locked by the woman.

"I think my master has callers just now," she added, "but it ain't likely they will stay long. He told me to let him know as soon as you came, and I'll take you up to his bedroom and then speak to him. As soon as the men are gone he will come to you. See?"

"Of course!"

Rube answered promptly, but, in point of fact, he did not "see" at all. Mr. Banderson was expecting some boy—that much was clear—and had business with him, but what the business was the Citizen did not know, and he was certainly not the boy whom Banderson expected.

It occurred to him that though he had got inside the house, he would be far better off outside it, and prudence counseled prompt retreat, but he did not yield to its dictates. He had wanted to get into the house; he was there; he determined to remain as long as he could.

At the least he would see the face of mysterious Mr. Banderson, and if that man wanted to have him arrested for a burglar—why, the Rag Alley Citizen must trust to his wits to get out of the fix.

The servant had started up-stairs and he followed.

When the second floor was reached, he could hear voices in the rear room, but he was ushered into the front one, where the woman made a light.

"I'll go and tell my master, and then sit on the stairs until he comes," she then answered.

This plan did not please Rube, for it shut off all chance for him to go to the door of the rear room and listen, but he had to take the bitter with the sweet. The door closed, shutting him inside alone.

The room was an ordinary, fairly-furnished chamber, and some one had lately been lying down on the outside of the bed. There was a compact wall at the rear which destroyed all hope of listening to the men. Rube looked sharply around. Convinced that Banderson was a rascal, he would not have scrupled to look at any scattered letters, but not a letter was visible. Absolutely no tell-tale matter was lying around.

Citizen Rat-trap settled back to wait, and his thoughts began to run in a lively fashion.

"Here I be in the greatest expl'ite o' my life, an' I must say it's a dub'us one. Pooty soon Banderson will come in; he'll see that the boy he sees ain't the one he wants ter see; an' he'll land me kerslop in the Dry Torture-agus, or some other perlece station. Hum! Not pleasant fur you, Rat-trap! What'll yer four-footed cousins at Number 7 do? Who'll bail ye out? You're an orphan an' a widder, an' never havin' been a voter an' sold yer ballot, you can't rely on perlitikel infloence. Nary time!"

The eminent Citizen was not so much cast down as he ought to have been, but he did realize that he was cruising in dangerous waters.

There was a stir in the hall; the sound of heavy footsteps; and he realized that Norton and Green were going away.

The crisis was near at hand.

Evidently Banderson saw his callers out; then he came back up-stairs and the door opened.

A tall, bony old man of gentlemanly appearance entered the room. Rube braced himself for the encounter, assuming an air as innocent as possible. He expected that Banderson's first look would result in an explosion, but, on the contrary, the new-comer added pleasantly:

"So you are the boy?" he inquired.

"I be," Rube acknowledged.

"Larrabee couldn't get here, could he?"

"No."

"Well, how did you succeed with my work?"

"Not over an' above wal."

"Did you find the man?"

"No."

"Did you ask the servants if he was around?"

"I did, that."

Rube had not the ghost of an idea what all this talk was about, but he answered promptly.

"Was the rumor true that the women had gone away?" continued Banderson.

"I reckon it was."

"Did you ask if they took clothing with them?"

"Yes; they took a grip-sack full," Rube boldly stated.

"They evidently mean to run the old man down."

"I should say so."

"It's odds where he has gone to."

"That's a fact."

Banderson walked slowly across the room, his head bent in a thoughtful way.

"Some of my agents have just brought a report which is very suggestive," he resumed, after a pause.

"That so?"

"Yes; I was talking with them when you came in. One of them is still down-stairs, and I want you to see him, anon."

Rube's face clouded; of all men he least wished to see Norton or Green.

"By the way," added Banderson, "do you know where Rag Alley is?"

CHAPTER XI.

BRANCHING OUT AS KEEPER OF WILD BEASTS.

CITIZEN RUBE started slightly and looked sharply at the questioner, but there was nothing suspicious in Banderson's manner.

"Rag Alley?" the boy repeated. "Wal, I b'lieve I've heerd o' the place, but I can't say jest where it is."

"It is in a hard part of the city, and is, itself, a sink of broils, poverty, drunkenness, misery and crime."

"You recommend it wal," Rube observed, dryly.

"I do not overstate the facts. I speak plainly, because I have a proposition to make to you. You saw old Kendricks once, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Sartain."

"Good! Well, I wish you to go to Rag Alley and hire a room at Number 7."

Rube's eyes dilated. Was he to appear at that delightful place as a person who would pay somebody solid cash to move out?

"At that house, in the front room on the second floor, is an old man who, I strongly suspect, may be Kendricks. He calls himself Solomon Sinn!"

Rube tried to subdue the sparkle which would appear in his eyes.

"Propriate name," he observed, vaguely.

"Very. Well, assuming that John Solomon Kendricks and Solomon Sinn are one, I see great danger to my plans in the fact that he is at Rag Alley."

"Jest so."

"I know of no one who would be more likely to escape notice in the house than you, for you are a boy, and I would like to have you occupy a room there, at my expense, long enough to see this Sinn and settle it definitely."

"Of course I'm at yer service, but," Rube boldly added, "why in the world should Kendricks go there?"

"Well, you see—"

Banderson began hesitatingly, and ended by giving it up entirely. Then he began over again.

"Kendricks is working on the same game I am, and he would do anything to win. He probably has some object in going to Rag Alley, though what it is I can't say."

"I see."

"His complete disappearance from Mrs. Smith's leads me to believe he has gone into exile somewhere. This brings up another question: Where have the Smiths gone? The fact learned by you that they took some baggage indicates that they mean to stop some time."

"Not nec'sarily. A woman usually takes a hull trunk ef she goes ter stop over-night."

Banderson smiled and replied:

"Well, I want you to go down and see Ezra Norton now."

Rube moved uneasily. This was just what he did not want to do. Ezra would be sure to recognize him as the boy he had seen in Solomon Sinn's room, and this would be a great calamity. There was more than himself to think of—he had made a start in Banderson's good graces by means of his bold artifice, and much good might come of it if he could pass undetected.

Just then there was a rap at the door, and the female servant appeared.

"Norton has gone away," she announced. "He had forgotten something he wanted to say to Green, but he stated he would be back to-morrow."

"Confound the fellow! I wanted he should tell you how to find Number 7, Rag Alley."

The last words were addressed to Rube, and that youth answered with becoming modesty:

"I think I can find the house, sir."

"Well, Norton will be around to-morrow, anyhow. Are you sleepy, boy?"

"Not a hair."

"Larrabee says you are to be trusted."

"So I be."

"Conscience not too delicate, eh?"

"Bless ye," returned Rube, with the air of a desperado on a small scale, "how is a kid goin' ter git along in New York ef he's too tender-hearted?"

"I am glad to see you are so sensible. Well, I am going to trust you fully. Larrabee recommends you highly, and he is not a man to make mistakes. Tom—your name is Tom, I believe?"

"That's it, boss."

"I want you to sleep in the basement of this house to-night!"

"That'll be a jolly good bunk."

"The fact is, I have an untamed bear in a cage there, and all the boys around here are so determined to get at him that I have to keep a guard every night. My regular man is away to-night. The grizzly is very ferocious, indeed, but is harmless if left alone. The cage is in a small room, partitioned off for that purpose, and we keep him in the dark. As long as that is done he is quiet enough, but a ray of light will arouse him to fury, making us fear that he will break from the cage and tear us all to pieces. Now, all a guard has to do is to sit there and watch. He can have a light, but he must not let the grizzly see it. Dare you take the place for one night?"

Rube did not show any signs of timidity, but did find it hard to hide his disgust. In his opinion, he had just heard the biggest kind of a

"fish story," and as he did not want any one to think him so green as to swallow all he heard, he felt disgusted in the extreme.

He felt positive that there was no bear, tamed or untamed, in the basement. What was there he did not know, but it flashed upon him that Banderson had some secret which he wished to hide by raising the bugbear of a dangerous animal.

The Citizen was so much affected by this that he determined to know the secret, if possible.

"I've seen bears an' the like in cages at Central Park, an' they didn't hurt me," he remarked, meditatively.

"My grizzly is equally harmless if left alone."

"What boodle is in it?"

"One dollar for the night."

"Jerusha! I ain't throwin' no dollar-job over my shoulder this week! I'll stay ef you've got a hull mernagerie thar, mister!"

"Very well; it's a bargain."

"Always thought I's cut out fur a keeper o' wild beastes."

"You need have no fear."

"I won't hev any."

"You will, of course, keep pretty quiet, and if you hear Old Eph rattling his chains, be sure not to let him hear you."

"Jes'so."

"In case he makes any great racket, come to me immediately."

"So I will. A quiet bear I kin stand guard over, but ef thar is ter be a wrastle with the varmint, of course you are the chap to hold up our end. I'm some guns at collar-an'-elbow wrastlin' with two-legged quadrupeds, but I drawr the line the safe side o' four-legged grizzlies."

"You are a wise youth, but there is no danger if you follow my directions."

Banderson seemed to be somewhat anxious, and he repeated the directions referred to. Evidently, he desired Rube to keep good watch and remain away from the room which held the cage and the grizzly.

When his cautions had been thoroughly repeated, he called the servant and directed her to guide "Tom" down. As a measure of safety they were not to hold any conversation while there, but all had been arranged in advance, so that the boy could understand.

He was conducted down.

The room proved to be the back basement, or kitchen. One corner had been partitioned off with stout planks, and in one side was a door with a heavy padlock upon it. All this was for additional security, Banderson had stated, as the cage was supposed to be strong enough to hold the ferocious grizzly.

The servant pointed to a comfortable easy-chair; then, shaking her head gravely, indicated the closed room in the same way and beat her retreat. The door swung to and Citizen Rube was alone.

His first act was to sit down in the big chair, after which he fixed his gaze curiously upon the secret room.

"Daniel in the lions' den!" he muttered. "I kin jest about 'preciate Daniel's fix now, an' I must say I pity him. Don't'magine he enjoyed it a bit. Then, ag'in, thar is Bluebeard's closet, which nobody wants ter look in. I'm glad I was teached all these things, 'cause the warnin's come in handy now. Strange, but I feel jest like Bluebeard's wife—I want like p'ison ter look in that place!"

He shook his head and settled back further in his chair. Whatever his curiosity might lead him to do later, he was in no hurry to move. He might be under espionage, and he was not going to be rash.

There was some suspicion in his mind.

"Is Banderson a fool, or does he think me one? Is he as stupid as he seems, or is this a trap? My double, the unknown 'Tom,' must a' been mighty wal recommended as a rascal, or Banderson would not hev put me down here to guard his secret. Or is it a trap?"

The Citizen studied this point, but could not see what Banderson was to gain thereby. He decided that all was open and fair in the situation; he was being trusted simply because he was believed to be a villain.

Another thing occurred to him.

When the servant first spoke she had told him that they had not expected him so soon. It seemed, then, that the genuine "Tom" was looked for. What if he was to put in an appearance? If he did, Citizen Rube would find himself in an unpleasant fix.

Putting this possibility aside, he directed his attention to the pen in the corner.

"Guess Old Eph is asleep," he muttered. "I

don't hear no rattlin' o' chains, nor no prowlin' about of any sort. I'd give a year's salary o' the mayor ter know what's in thar. Wouldn't be a tall s'prised ef it was a fair an' beauch'us damsel deprived o' her pussonal liberty an' chance ter gossip 'mongst the neighbors. Melancholy spetterkel! Rat-trap, you may yit come ter the surface as a romantic hero!"

The Citizen grimaced. Nothing could obliterate his fancy for the absurd and humorous.

There was nothing to indicate that he was being watched to test his loyalty, but he was duly cautious. He kept his seat, but, as soon as was prudent, intended to discover what was in the pen in the corner.

CHAPTER XII.

RUBE LOOKS INTO BLUEBEARD'S CLOSET.

An hour passed. Rube arose to his feet. He believed that if he had at any time been watched by Banderson, or his servant, the espionage had before then been withdrawn.

Consequently, it was time to investigate the locked room.

As he rose the silence in that quarter was suddenly broken. The clanking of chains became very distinct. Rube could hardly restrain an impulse to dance for joy. He had lately read an old-time story which was full of sliding panels, secret passages, trap-doors, dark dungeons and clanking chains, and the idea of finding a thirteenth century romance in the basement of a New York house was interesting.

"Is it a beauch'us maiden, or is it a measly old grizzly b'ar, with claws seventeen inches long?" he muttered.

Clank! clank!

The sounds continued, showing the unknown object on the move, and what was more, he seemed to be approaching the locked door. Rube glided forward and held his ear near the planks.

Then came a new sound.

Rap! rap! rap!

It was a pounding on the other side of the partition.

"Come in!" muttered the boy, in an undertone.

"Say, are you there?"

It was unmistakably a human voice, though very indistinct and muffled, and it came from behind the door.

"The grizzly talks!" uttered Rube.

"Say, you!—you've forgot to put any water in here, an' I'm in need on't. My throat is as dry as Sahara, an' drink I must have. I ain't partic'lar as ter the sort; whisky will do, though water is what I'm howlin' for. Somethin' I must have!"

"The grizzly drinks whisky!" interpolated Rube. "He must be a good 'eal tamed an' civilized, by mighty!"

"Be you asleep out there?" continued the voice of the unseen.

Still Rube made no audible answer.

"Perhaps you think you kin keep me quiet when I hanker fur water, but it won't work. Drink I will have, or I'll stan' right up on my hind legs an' yell!"

"Can't be a beauch'us maiden!" quoth Rube, shaking his head. "She wouldn't do that!"

"You infernal land-lubber, why don't you answer?"

No doubt the words were lustily shouted, but they came to Rube as muffled as ever.

"Nobody would be used this way on the high seas," lamented the alleged grizzly. "I've seen men in irons, an' held fur high crimes an' misdemeanors; but never the time when water was refused him—by Neptune! no! Shiver my timbers if a land-shark ain't the worst thing afloat or ashore. Give me the good old deck of a stout ship, an' let the wind whistle ever so sharp, an' the waves roll ever so high, an' the 'old man' be ever so much a tyrant; but I'll take my chances there any time. Lord bless you! I've had my taste o' the cat, well laid on, but never the time was water refused me when we rode the blue waves. A sailor's life for me, an' ter Davy Jones's locker with all land-lubbers who begrudge a sailor-lad the means o' wettin' his whistle! Yes, by Neptune!"

The complaining voice died away, but there was only brief silence. Rube had grown excited, and he hastened to speak.

"Say, who be you?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"Who be you?"

"You'll have ter speak louder."

Rube glanced toward the hall door. To speak louder was just what he did not wish to do. There was nothing to muffle his voice, except

from the unknown, and if he raised it very high he might have Banderson down there in a twinkling.

"What's your name?" he continued.

"I ain't workin' no game."

"I said name, not 'game.'"

"What's that?"

"Tell me who you be!"

"Don't I wish I was at sea? Wal, you bet I do! Hang the land, an' all land-lubbers!"

Rube was in despair. It seemed impossible to make the other speaker hear without shouting so loud that the alarm would thereby be sounded. The situation had become interesting. The fraud of the prison-room was partially revealed; the prisoner was nothing more or less than a man; and certain things looked very significant to Rube. He was eager to know more about the unknown, but how was he to do it? Loud conversation was dangerous, and the prisoner evidently believed he was talking with his usual guard.

There was fresh rapping at the door.

"Say, messmate, I'll take back all I said, an' eat humble-pie, ef. you'll give me some water."

"Be you chained?" asked Rube.

"I can't be blamed? Well, I should say not—"

"Be you chained?" Rube shouted.

"Of course I be."

"Whar is the key kept?"

"You ought ter know; I don't."

Rube determined to risk everything in an effort to make one more question audible to the prisoner.

"What's your name?" he called, loudly.

"My name? Wal, I ain't ashamed to give it; it's a good, honest name, ef I ain't good an' honest. Asa Frink is my name, the wide seas over!"

Rube was jubilant. He had vaguely suspected as soon as the unseen man began to utter sailor talk that he might be Asa Frink, though there had been no good ground for the belief. Now that he was sure of it, he resolved to help him if possible.

He had a very friendly feeling for his sailor pard.

The Citizen looked at the padlock. It was heavy, and well calculated to stand any strain upon it. But where was the key? The natural inference was that Banderson had it up-stairs, but Rube began to search the kitchen. It might be concealed in some crevice. The sailor continued to talk, but he no longer had a listener; Rube was looking eagerly for the key.

At the end of five minutes he had given up the effort, satisfied that it was not in the room.

There was only one hope left, and that was to pry off the lock. This did not promise much, for it looked stout and firm, but it must be tried. But what could he use? A crowbar would have been just the thing, but nothing of that kind was at hand. He looked at the iron bars over the windows.

If he could secure one it would make an excellent substitute. He lost no time in trying.

The result was encouraging. He found that time had somewhat loosened the bars, and he went to work zealously. For at least five minutes he pulled and twisted—then one end was wrenched away.

After that the task was not so hard, and the whole bar was finally secured.

Armed with this he went back and inserted it in the padlock.

"Now fur the tug-o'-war!" he muttered. "Wish I had Asa Frink here ter give me a lift, but he's on the wrong side o' the door. Now, Rat-trap, hump yerself an' show what you're made on. Never let it be said that one o' yer fam'bly got left in a tussle fur anything whatsumdever!"

While talking he had been working, also, making a desperate attempt to twist the lock open. It was no easy job, but he was strong and determined, and as the bar proved to be just the thing, victory finally rewarded his efforts.

There was a snap, and the lock flew open.

Rube dropped the bar and tore the door open.

Asa Frink, bound to the wall with chains, stood revealed.

"Hullo! is it you, old chap?" Rube cried.

A lamp stood on a table in the prison-room, but it had nearly gone out, and the sudden increase of light dazzled the sailor. He put his manacled hands to his eyes.

"You ain't the jailer, be ye?" he asked.

"Not much! Don't ye know me, Asa?"

Frink shook his head.

"Can't say I do."

"Don't ye remember the boy you talked with at Rag Alley?"

"I remember gettin' drunk as a fool an' goin' there, but who I talked with I don't know."

"Twas me."

"Might a' been the Flyin' Dutchman, for all I remember."

"You an' me made friends."

"Did we? Then s'pose you let me out o' here?"

"Jest what I'm goin' ter do."

"You be?"

"Y—."

"Messmate, give us your fin!" exclaimed the sailor, putting out his manacled hands. "Ef you're in earnest, we will renew our vows o' friendship right off, quick. I bear in mind that when I drifted into Rag Alley Harbor, a whisky-logged wreck, I did a good 'eal o' talkin' to somebody. So it was you? Well, messmate, just git me red o' this anchor, so I kin spread sail an' get away under a spankin' breeze, an' you'll find that Asa Frink is in condition to remember his friends, this time!"

He was the same bluff sailor of old, only the degrading effects of liquor were gone from him and he was a keen, resolute man instead.

"But how in thunder came you here, whar all the sharks are my foes?" he added.

"I played a trick on 'em, Asa. I ain't got time ter explain now, for all your enemies would be mine, too, ef they dropped ter the racket. What we want is ter get out o' here on the run, afore they come in an' see what I'm up ter. Once they do that, our name is Mud, messmate."

"How in thunder am I ter get these irons off?"

"Don't you know how?"

"They unlock with a key, an' they have took the key away."

"Mebbe I kin twist them off—"

Rube stopped short and held up one hand warningly.

"Hark! Somebody's comin'! Great Scott! Asa, hev they diskivered my game?"

CHAPTER XIII.

TRouble in the Basement.

FOOTSTEPS had sounded outside, and Rube for a moment lost his calmness. Exposure seemed certain, and Frink would be perfectly helpless in any struggle which might ensue.

One moment of weakness, and then all of Rat-trap's native audacity returned.

"Mum is the word, Asa! I'll try ter fool 'em. Don't give me away!"

He darted out of the prison-room and closed the door. The padlock showed no signs of having been tampered with except that it was open, instead of shut, and when he had slipped it back in place it was well calculated to deceive the eye. A hand laid upon it, however, would at once expose the fraud.

There had been a hesitating, shuffling sound in the hall, as though some one was having difficulty in finding the door, but the latter now opened.

Rube looked and saw a boy of about his age.

The latter paused and looked around.

"Ain't bat here ter-night?" he asked.

"No," promptly, coolly returned Rube.

"Where is he?"

"Gone out fur a little fun."

Rube suspected that "Pat" was the regular jailer, and had answered accordingly. The other boy looked at him critically.

"I don't know you."

"I don't know you," Rube answered.

"I'm Tom Benley."

Rube had never heard the last name before, but he believed that he caught the idea. The boy for whom he had been mistaken by Banderson and the servant had at last arrived, himself. It was lucky Banderson was not there.

"Good name!" muttered the Citizen.

"I'm a friend o' Larrabee."

"I see."

"Whar's the old man?"

"What old man?"

"Why, Banderson."

"Gone ter bed."

"Call him up."

"What fur?"

"I've got business with him."

"He's gone ter bed sayin' he won't see nobody."

"He was ter see me immedi't I came."

"Jes' so, but he changed his mind," explained Rube, who was by that time fully himself.

"You see, he was took with a voy'leent pain in his stummick, an' it nigh about laid him out. He's a man o' sand, Banderson is; but he jest

grupped his han's over his bread-basket an' belleder like a buff'ler. That's why he turned in. He mentioned the boy Larrabee was ter send—I heerd him speak o' the boy, myself—an' I was ter tell him ter call ter-morrer ef he comes."

"I see how it is."

"I see ye do."

Rube spoke with grim facetiousness.

"Wa'n't you'sprised ter see me walk in?" Tom asked.

"I was that."

"Larrabee give me his key, it was so late."

"Jes' so."

"What ye got in that pen?"

"A brindle-backed hyena!" Rube calmly replied.

"You don't say so!"

"No; I don't, but Banderson does. I ain't never seen it, an' wouldn't venture ter go nigh the critter. It is an animile o' peridious strength an' ferocity. It once took four men at once an' tore 'em up so bad that they was afterwards used fur fiddle-strings. Anyhow, that's the way the story goes."

"Whar did Banderson git it?" asked Tom, his eyes protruding in wonder.

"Captered in Central Afrikay."

"Where's that?"

"In Jersey, som'ers out beyond Hoboken. Don't jest know where."

"I always wondered what Pat had charge of here. What're they goin' ter do with it?"

"It's in trainin' ter be a Wall street broker."

Tom looked at Rube doubtfully, but the latter's face was as grave as a parson's. Tom felt that he was called upon to credit a good deal, but he had never heard of such a thing as a hyena before, did not know what it was, and was ashamed to ask. He could not say positively whether a hyena was by nature fitted to be a Wall street broker, but he had his doubts.

Rube's innocent look restored his doubts somewhat.

"I shall ask Banderson ter let me see it ter-morrer," he declared.

"All right; come around."

"Do you object ter my spendin' the night here?"

"I ussally I don't; but it's Banderson's orders ter have nobody in here an' no talk. He tol' me not ter sing or whistle, fur fear the hyena should tear the cage in pieces, an' not ter let nobody in."

"Do you work reg'lar fur Banderson?"

Rube was too shrewd to claim that he did.

"No; but my father has done lot's o' work fur him. My dad is poor, but he's known Ban a long time, an' they're quite frien'y."

Tom stood still and let his gaze wander around. It came back to the closed door, and it was plain that the room had a fascination for him, but he made no comments.

"I guess I'll go," he observed.

"Call fur me when you come around ter-morrer. I'll be glad ter see ye."

"What's yer name?"

"Jim Grifflin."

"All right; I'll see ye."

Tom turned and walked away. Rube wanted to make sure that he was really going, and he followed him to the hall. The boy went out; Rube locked the door after him; and one danger was for the time disposed of. Rube's success in fooling Tom had put him in great good humor, and he opened the prison-door with a grin on his face.

"Come out, you brindle-backed hyena!" he directed, addressing Asa Frink.

"I heard all," the sailor replied, "an', by Neptune! I am proud ter have you for a messmate. As fur comin' out, I can't do it. You will remember that I am chained."

"I'd forgot that, but we'll have you out directly."

The Citizen made for his iron bar, and it was again put into use. This time more than brute strength was needed. Frink's wrists could not bear the violent wrenching which had conquered the door, and they had a long struggle. By means of ingenuity Asa was spared any great amount of pain, and he finally stood a free man again.

He shook hands joyfully with his rescuer.

"You're a brick!" he declared.

"Modesty keeps me from admittin' that you're right, but I have succeeded tolerable considerin' I'm an orphian an' a widder."

"True. Wal, what next?"

"Next, we want ter git out o' this house like a beggar goin' fur a hot pertater."

"We will go at once."

They did not go at once, and that they did not was owing to an unfortunate interruption. It seemed to be their ill-fortune to have some one

come in upon them just when they wanted visitors least; and when Rube's sharp ears detected the sound of footsteps on the stairs he was not slow to seek measures of safety.

"Back in thar, quicker'n scat!" he exclaimed. His hurried order caused Asa to act without having formed a plan of his own, and once more the door closed upon him. Rube noticed that the footsteps were slow and heavy, and, suspecting that Banderson was coming, he returned to his easy-chair.

The door opened and the old man appeared. The Citizen nodded with all possible coolness.

"Out fur a walk?" he asked, genially.

"Slightly. Is everything well here?"

"Perfeckly correct."

"Is the grizzly quiet?"

"Yes. I reckon he must be sleepin'."

"I was afraid he might get hungry and make a disturbance, particularly if you made any sound by accident."

"You bet I haven't! I ain't no coward, but I don't hanker fur a muss with a wild-eyed grizzly b'ar. I have set right here like a little lamb an' thought how nice it was that grizzlies sleep."

Banderson laughed and moved toward the prison-door. It at once dawned upon Rube that he meant to try the lock, and the necessity of preventing this was apparent. The Citizen sought desperately for a pretext.

"Won't you come here an' see what's the matter with this chair?" he asked, feeling the resort a very lame one.

"In a moment."

Banderson spoke calmly, unsuspiciously, but laid his hand upon the broken lock. He gave it a slight wrench, and it fell rattling against the door.

The fraud was exposed.

"What's this?" he cried

"It's me!"

The reply came promptly from inside the prison-room, and then Asa Frink's arm shot out and his big hand closed over Banderson's neck.

The old man was taken wholly by surprise, and after the grasp was upon him he had no chance to give the alarm. Asa's body followed his arm, and he shook Banderson as a dog might a rat.

"You old rascal!" he shouted, "I am a good mind ter smash you all ter pieces!"

Banderson tried to speak, but could not.

"Set a lot of assassins upon me, ter beat me inter a pulp, will ye?" roared the sailor. "Shut me up in a hole like that with chains on me, will ye? Shiver my timbers! ef I ain't a good mind ter do ye up!"

"No voy'lence, Asa!" remonstrated Rube, really alarmed for the old man's safety.

"Oh! I won't kill the scoundrel, though it would be a mighty good job—you don't know him. Ef you was in my place you'd do him up right off, quick!"

The speaker knocked his prisoner up against the wall.

"Stand there! My grip on yer swaller may be a bit harsh, an' I want ye ter live long enough ter shake hands with the hangman, so I'll loose my hold; but, mind you, don't you dare ter yell!"

He released his hold slightly, and Banderson did not "yell." He stood trembling before his late captive, pale with craven fear.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SAILOR MAKES ASSERTIONS.

CITIZEN RUBE looked on approvingly. He had no clew to the nature of the trouble between the two men, but he had faith in Asa Frink, and did not believe he was in the wrong. Banderson's teeth chattered as he made answer:

"My goo—good man, don't kill me!"

"Kill a cat!" exclaimed Asa, in disgust. "It would be more honor."

"I have not harmed you."

"Drop it, you old hypocrite! P'raps you think it is nothin' ter shut up a sailor fresh from the high seas. That may be your idea of the eternal fitness o' things, but it ain't mine. By Neptune! it don't suit a world-wide rover. Take an honest lad an' load him down with chains in a dungeon, eh? Destruction take all sharks like you!"

"We did you no bodily harm—"

"What! what! Didn't your man hit me with a club in the saloon, an' didn't the Spaniard go fur me with that bloody knife o' his'n?"

"I was not there—"

"They were your tools. Cheese it, old man; don't try to see how big a fool you can be. Idiots should not be killed, an', great rascal that you are, I sha'n't hurt you. Don't oblige

me ter say that again. Stop shakin' like a whipped cur, an' jest hark to me. You'll see I am out o' jail."

Banderson turned a vicious glance upon Rube.

"That boy did it!"

"Never mind who did it. It's enough that your brief day is over—an' you won't never git another. Don't try it, old man; I sha'n't fill up with liquid ruin ag'in, an' ef your men throw grappin'-irons an' try ter board me, I'll give them grape-shot an' blow every man ter glory!"

Banderson ventured no reply.

"I've a good mind ter punch ye once fur luck!" muttered the sailor.

"Don't!" gasped the old schemer.

"I won't; the touch of you would bo-poison ter me. Wal, you may have a lot o' beelers drop in here any minute, an' I won't hang around your pestiferous old ark any longer. Escort us ter the front door like gentlemen an' let us out!"

"Yes, yes; certainly!" replied Banderson, with alacrity.

Asa nodded to Rube.

"Now we're off, my lad!" he certified.

Banderson led the way, and they kept close to his heels. He was thoroughly subdued and attempted no treachery; indeed, he was delighted to get rid of them. The front door was soon reached; he unlocked it and they passed out. Asa only remained to give one last caution, and then they walked away down the street. Not a word was spoken for two blocks; then the sailor suddenly aroused.

"Lad, I owe you one!" he declared.

"We're messmates, you know."

"Ay, ay! I stick to the old compact, ef I did make it when I was in a bad way. You've proved your devotion well, an' I know you are a good 'un!"

"Did they take you right from the saloon to Banderson's house?"

"They did that; Ban was at the head of the whole plot. He set the other men on, though I knew them of old. Well, well, I'll have a settlement with the bull lot. Shiver my timbers ef I let any such sharks buffet me around!"

Frink slapped his hand upon his thigh, and seemed to wish that he had the offenders there at that moment, but his anger was the just indignation of an honest man.

"Why be they so down on ye?"

"It all comes o' Banderson. He hired the Spaniard an' another man ter throw me overboard from the good ship Mary Selina, an' because they failed, an' the Spaniard got the cat wal laid on his back out on't, they hate me as much as Banderson fears me."

"Fears ye?"

"Jes' so."

"Asa, you an' me are messmates. I'd like ter know what all this racket is about."

"It goes a long way back, lad, an' I hold secrets which Banderson don't want the world ter know. He's a big knave an' villain, an' he's afeerd his crimes will find him out."

"Was it about the man who was killed at Number 7, Rag Alley?"

Asa turned abruptly.

"Hullo! what do you know about that?"

"You told me."

"When?"

"When you was at Rag Alley."

"Oh! oh! oh!—what a fool a man is when he gits water-logged with whisky! Lad, ef you ever see me full again, be so good as ter club me right in the heak!"

"I'll see about it, Jack Foulweather."

"Don't ask me ter explain ter-night; I'll see you ter-morrer, an' we'll lay plans fur the future."

"One question."

"Heave ahead."

"Do you know a man named John Solomon Kendricks?"

"You bet!"

"What sort of a chap is he?"

"He's a fit pal fur Banderson. Two bigger knaves never walked the wide world than them two."

Rube's face fell. He had felt sure that Kendricks, alias Solomon Sinn, was an honest, worthy man, and he had been thinking of telling Asa all about him. He was now at fault, and was shown the difficulty of serving two masters.

"If you ever see the varmint, up an' holler an' run away with ev'ry stitch of canvas spread," Asa added.

"I'll remember."

"By the way, I b'lieve when I's loaded I let

out the fact that I wanted to hire a certain room at Number 7?"

"You did."

"What one was it?"

"Second floor front."

"Jes' so. Who did you tell me occupied that room?"

"Solomon Sinn."

"I want ter pay him ter move out an' let me hev it. S'pose he'll do it?"

"Twon't do no harm ter ask."

"Not a fraction."

"I'll call round ter-morrer."

"Say, Asa, what's the 'traction in that room?"

"Oh! I've got ter have some quarters—"

"Drop it, Asa! You was confidential when you was full, an' you tol' me a man had been killed in that room. That's plain talk enough, but that is more to it. What is in that room that you want?"

The Citizen paused, turned full upon Frink, looked him full in the face and nodded several times in succession. The sailor, however, seemed a good deal disturbed and not inclined to talk.

"You're on the wrong track, messmate. What could be in that room that I want?"

"Things left by the murdered man, mebbe!"

"Go' way. You're wild!"

"Jack Foulweather, you an' I kin never do much as messmates unless you reform. You won't let me inter your game at all, though I've jest got ye out o' a fix. Don't that count fur nothin'?"

"Ay, ay, lad; it counts for a heap, an' I appreciate it from my heart, by Neptune! You shall know all—you shall, I swear!—but don't ask me ter-night. Mornin' can't be no great ways off, an' the story will keep. One thing let me say, so you needn't put faith in any o' our enemies. Elijah Banderson, John Solomon Kendricks and Eunice Travers were all cousins, though no two had the same parents. Eunice married the man who was killed at Rag Alley, an' as Banderson an' Kendricks hated her, that brought their wrath down on ter her husband—Herbert Landers his name was."

"An' they killed him at Rag Alley?"

"Foully murdered!"

"What for?"

"Wait until ter-morrer, lad."

"Delays are dangerous."

"Not in this case."

"S'pose somebody kidnaps me?"

"They only take fools in drink."

Asa was clearly determined not to be too confidential until he had had time to consider the matter, and Rube urged him no further. They had been walking in a course which had brought Rube near Rag Alley, and they finally came to a stop and proceeded to say their last words for the night. There was but little to add. Frink promised to call upon the Citizen during the day, expressed his thanks warmly once more, and then they separated.

Rube walked on in a thoughtful mood.

He was brought to the necessity of deciding upon some mode of action. While the interests of Solomon Sinn and Frink seemed so widely apart, he could not loyally serve both at the same time.

Under which was he to work?

He found it hard to believe all that Asa had alleged against Sinn—admitting that Sinn was, really, John Solomon Kendricks—and the idea grew upon him that, having entered the latter's service and agreed to work for his interests, he had no choice in the matter until more proof was vouchsafed that Sinn was a man of evil character.

He decided to deal frankly with his employer, keeping back nothing, unless it was the knowledge of Asa. In regard to him it would be well to feel his way.

Reaching Number 7, he entered the house and was soon at Sinn's door. A light was burning inside, and when he knocked there was a prompt answer. Rube had been at a loss to know how he was to enter, as the key was inside and Solomon could not rise, but the latter had settled that question. His bed was near the door, and he had thrown down the key and worked it along with his cane until one movement more would push it under the door.

This movement he made now, and Rube entered.

The scene had not changed, but Solomon was as alert and keen-eyed as ever.

"Welcome! welcome!" he exclaimed. "I had begun to fear for your safety."

"I'm a rat no cat kin catch."

"Did you follow the men?"

"You bet I did."

"Successfully?"

"To a fine point. I must say that I did wal, considerin' I am an orphian an' a widder. They suspected that an avenger was on the track, an' I run 'em down. They went straight to their boss."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do, that—it's Elijah Banderson!"

Sinn's face grew dark with the frown that overspread it.

"I suspected as much!" he muttered. "The scoundrel! he thinks he is going to beat me in this game!"

CHAPTER XV.

AN ENEMY ENTERS

RUBE was ready with his reply.

"I take it you know him."

"Too well. It is my misfortune that he is slightly related to me."

"I've heerd a bit about his relatives. One was named John Solomon Kendricks."

Sinn shot a quick glance at the boy.

"I guess you have improved your time."

"So I hev, Mr. Kendricks."

"Call me Sinn; I hold that name for the present. You know me. Well, I trust you are not thinking of deserting me at this crisis?"

"Not by a good 'eal!"

"Did you see Banderson?"

"Yes."

"Did he mention me?"

"Yes."

"Does he know where I am?"

"He has suspicions, Elijah has. You see, you told Norton an' Green that they come here fur somethin' important, an' Norton got skeered, thinkin' you was dangerous some way; an' when he told Elijah, he got the same wrinkle, though none on 'em is sartain."

"Tell me the whole story!"

"Lemme get my breath first. I heerd other names mentioned. One was Eunice Travers."

"Poor child!" sighed Sinn.

"Another was Asa Frink."

"An honest, hearty soul. He was a sailor, and a good fellow in his way. Eunice Travers married Herbert Landers, under whose father, James Landers, Frink sailed on the ocean. Old Captain Landers was an honest, steady man, but Herbert was dissipated. Ah! ah!—it cost him dear!"

"What became on him?"

"He met a violent death."

"Not murdered?"

"I believe he was—but let us speak of something else. What did they say about Frink? Is he alive?"

"I think so."

"He bore me no good-will, but it was through a misapprehension. He thought I was leagued with the enemies of Eunice Travers. He never made a greater error. I would, to-day, give many a hundred dollars to undo the mischief of the past, but it is too late. Eunice and her husband are both dead. But, come! I am chattering idly. Tell your story."

"Wait one second more. Ef you seen Asa Frink, would you meet him as a friend?"

"Yes, most decidedly."

"Could you prove you was friend ter Eunice, too?"

"Of course. But why do you ask all these questions? Have you news of Asa?"

"Yes."

"Tell it at once! I am in a fever of impatience, and will wait no longer. Tell me all!"

Rube hesitated no further. He believed that he had proved Solomon to be all right, and he described his adventures of the night in full, not even omitting a due account of Asa Frink.

Sinn listened intently, and his sharp eyes glittered and gleamed. He interrupted with questions occasionally, and when he heard of Banderson's discomfiture he broke into a series of chuckles which were so violent that Rube grew alarmed.

Solomon, however, was in great good humor.

"A bigger knave than that same Banderson don't live, and I'm glad he came to grief. Frink ought to have choked him some more. That Frink is a good, honest felli w, and I am glad to hear you are to see him aga' n. I want him up in this room."

Rube had saved one revelation for the last.

"He'll come; he's got a peap salter make ter you."

"A proposal? What?"

"He wants ter pay you a certain sum ter move out o' this room an' let him in!"

Again Solomon's eyes sparkled.

"Another candidate for the room. What does Asa want?"

"He didn't say."

"He need not—he wants the article we were searching for last evening."

"I don't know what that was."

"I do. Well, Asa is working from the same standpoint I am, I feel sure, and he and I need not quarrel. Once let me see and talk with him, and I will convince him that he has done me unintentional wrong in the past."

"Hope so, anyhow; an' I hope you'll conclude ter trust me enough ter let me know what all the disturbance is about."

"Don't be impatient, my lad," Sinn returned, smiling. "All will be known in due time. There is a race between Banderson and myself, and you are playing an important part in it."

"Shall I tear off some more boards?"

"Not to-night."

"We may find that diamond ring."

"The ring was only an imaginary article. Herbert Landers was slain in this room, and it is believed that he concealed something here before he was struck down. Whatever he had, these things have never come to light—hence, my search."

"I ketched on ter that."

"And now, Rat-trap, let's get some sleep. Day is coming rapidly, and we need all our nerve to-morrow."

Rube did not object, and in a few minutes the room was dark and silent. The Citizen was not long in falling asleep, and he was too weary to dream. When he again became conscious it was broad daylight, and he scrambled to his feet in haste.

Solomon Sinn looked at him with a smile.

"Guess I've over-slept," Rube observed.

"None too long; but you have slept through a cyclone."

"A what?"

"My dearly-beloved relatives, Sophronia Smith and her flower-garden daughter, Violet Pansy Chrysanthemum, or whatever her name is, have twice been to the door and hammered for admittance."

"You sent 'em away, eh?"

"I did not open my mouth," Solomon calmly answered. "This might have been a room for the dead for all the answer my charming relatives received. It's about time for them to knockle the door again, and you may put our den in order for their royal presence!"

His dislike for the women was perceptible in every way.

"His prophecy proved correct, for in about ten minutes there was another knock at the door. He raised his voice and roughly bade the applicant enter, and Mrs. Smith and Violet entered. Both looked haggard, but Sophronia was true to her ruling passion.

She ran nimbly to the bedside.

"Dear uncle, how do you do, to-day?" she asked, with a great show of solicitude.

"Sick abed, by Caesar!" Solomon declared, rudely.

"Surely, you are no worse?"

"I am!"

"Is there a new complication?"

"Yes, and it's dangerous. I have all the symptoms of yellow fever, and it is believed that I have it in an acute and malevolent form. The doctor will have an ambulance here presently to take me and all the other inmates of the house to the yellow-fever hospital!"

Violet uttered a dismal little shriek, and Sophronia turned pale.

"Surely, you are joking!" she stammered.

"Well, if there is any joke about the yellow fever I fail to see it."

"But it can't be possible."

"All right; just wait until I am dead, and my money is all absorbed in the erection of a charitable home for dogs and cats, and then you will believe."

"Dear uncle! you will have your joke. Well, I am glad you feel like it. Violet, love, our dear uncle is doing well!"

"Then don't turn my stomach. Keep your endearing terms on ice until you get back to Violet's half-pint dog; then you can utter them with impunity, and the wretched little cur will never feel any the worse for it. Don't hover over me like a hen brooding one lonesome chicken. Sit down, Sophronia, and rest—and give me a rest, too! Did you sleep well last night?"

Mrs. Smith shivered.

"Not any too well."

"Do you think you will like your room?"

"To be frank, dear uncle, I would not remain there under any condition were it not to be near you."

"Bless my soul! don't let that influence you. My fond Sophronia, take our flower-bed Violet and get back to the dog and parrot as soon as

possible. Do this, and I will never love you the less for it."

"Our duty is plain, uncle."

"Pity you can't see it!" growled Solomon. "But never mind; let's change the subject. You have enjoyed your palatial quarters; now let me enjoy breakfast if I can. Hustle, all you who worship me, and knock together a repast that will stay my stomach and put a dampener on the ambitious wrenches of rheumatism!"

Sinn was inclined to be in good-humor if he was afflicted with the presence of the Smiths, and he continued to give directions until breakfast was prepared. Mother and daughter got but little consolation for their labor, for his sarcasm continued, with the breakfast for a target, but it was all over at last, and he felt more comfortable than he would admit.

He then had a period of meditation, and had about decided to send the women away, whether they were reconciled or not, when there was a new, abrupt and exciting turn of affairs.

Without any warning the door opened and a man walked in. Rube saw him first and stood silent with surprise.

The intruder was Elijah Banderson!

The latter's air had been headlong and determined, but as he caught sight of Rube his face fell, and it was not until he had made an awkward pause that his gaze wandered to the bed.

He found Solomon looking at him steadily, and then ensued a war of glances. Both men forgot the presence of others, and their hostility toward each other was evident to the dullest observer.

It was Sinn who spoke first.

"So it's you?" he uttered.

"It is I, John Kendricks!" Banderson replied, recovering his coolness.

"To what errand am I indebted for the honor of this visit?" sarcastically asked Rube's employer.

"I wanted to satisfy myself if you were here."

"Are you satisfied?"

"I am."

"What next?"

"I see you are at your old tricks!"

"How so?"

"I know why you are here."

"Do you feel that my business is any of your business?"

"I shall make it so."

"What will you do?"

"I decline to show my hand, but you may rest assured that I shall beat you."

"And chain me to the wall in a dungeon?"

Banderson flashed a vicious glance toward Rube.

"I see that the boy has been tattling!" he exclaimed.

"The boy has beat you out, Banderson. All of your plans have gone to ruin. You thought when you sent your tools here that you had arranged matters finely, but they found me encamped on the ground. Possession is nine points of the law, Banderson!"

The visitor's gaze wandered around the room, and it was plain that he would have given a good deal to be in occupation of the place.

"If you fail to see what you want, ask for it!" added Sinn, with an irritating smile.

"I don't believe you have won yet."

"Be that as it may, I shall win in the end."

"Don't be too sure!" bitterly replied Banderson. "You have always crossed my path when you could, and I know how to deal with you now. It is war to the bitter end between us!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DANGER AHEAD.

SINN smiled in his usual cool, sarcastic way.

"Follow the bent of your own mind," he replied. "You are at liberty to be as dangerous as you can."

"I do not need your consent," retorted Banderson.

"Even that will not save you from defeat."

"We will see."

Banderson looked critically around the room again.

"Do you like my camp?" inquired Sinn, tantalizingly.

"It is your day for crowing, now," the visitor replied, with sullen and vicious curtness.

"You are completely beat out, Banderson!" Solomon evidently derived great pleasure from exulting over his enemy, and Elijah was correspondingly cast down. Rube almost expected to see him attack Sinn, and there could be no doubt that his will was good enough, but

he was not sufficiently reckless to put himself in trouble without some corresponding gain.

He turned toward the door.

"I'll leave you now; I don't like present company."

"If you want to flock with birds of your own feather, go to Sing Sing," Sinn advised.

Banderson shot him a vicious glance and paused for a moment at the door.

"You shall hear from me again!" he declared.

With this significant remark he went out, and his footsteps were soon heard on the stairs. Sinn broke into a series of exultant chuckles.

"He is down!—he is down!" the old man exclaimed. "The rascal has run to the end of his halter, and his last card is played!"

"Be you sure o' that?" Rube asked.

"How can it be otherwise?"

He sized up this room in a way I didn't like. What ef he should bring a gang here ter clean us out, get what he wants out o' the room, an' then skip?"

"That could hardly be done in broad day."

"Night is comin'."

"True."

Solomon answered thoughtfully. The last words had pointed to a real danger. Law was lax in the neighborhood of Rag Alley, fights were common, and one more added to the usual number would not attract much attention. From what he had seen during his own residence there Solomon was of the opinion that it would be possible for his enemy to collect a gang of roughs, visit the house, carry matters their own way and get clear—for all of outside interference.

It remained for himself to protect his property—perhaps his life.

He did considerable thinking for several minutes, and then turned to Mrs. Smith, who sat by the window like a picture of Melancholy.

"My beloved Sophronia, let me give you one word of advice," he said.

"What is it?" she asked, drearily.

"Go home!"

"Eh?"

"If you don't want to get into the worst row ever heard of, get away from Rag Alley! Before the dawn of another day there will be a fight here, and more gore will be spilled than you can shake a stick at. My esteemed cousin, Elijah, means business. So do I. Our business is bloody business, the like of which has never been equaled since Herod massacred the innocents!"

"Are you really in earnest?"

"I am."

"But it seems base to desert you—"

"Not a bit; your life depends upon it!"

Mrs. Smith looked frightened.

"But you—you—"

"I can care for myself. Armed with a seven-shooter," proclaimed Solomon, with a tragic air, "I can drop about that many men before they lay hands upon me."

The woman uttered a little shriek.

"Terrible! terrible!" she cried.

"Too terrible for you to witness. Get thee hence, Sophronia—hie thee home—and I will never love you less. By all means, go!"

Mrs. Smith's face brightened in spite of her efforts to look grave. Her experience at Rag Alley had disgusted her; the noise, squalor and drunken bickering were too much for her nerves; and, wearied out by a nearly sleepless night, she was glad of a chance to get away.

She did not jump too greedily at the chance. She talked very cleverly, speaking of her solicitude for her uncle, her fears of the rough men around and her pressing home duties, and as she and Solomon were both on one side in the discussion, there was no difficulty in arranging for the departure; and when it was once arranged, she did not lose much time in executing the plan.

She and Violet made ready, said a few more things meant to be agreeable, and then went their way.

Sinn smiled his most cynical smile.

"A pair of treacherous cats!" he observed.

"Be they mixed up in the case?"

"They want to be. They are my heirs-at-law, but they have a lively fear that I shall leave my property to some one else, and I guess they are about right. I wish Asa Frink would come!"

The last words were abruptly spoken, and from that time Solomon was uneasy, but it was an hour later when Mrs. Odjacks appeared to say that a "sailor-man" was down-stairs and wanted to see Rube.

It was Asa, and the Citizen was soon in conversation with him. When he learned that

Rube was an attendant on John Solomon Ken-dricks he was inclined to be suspicious, and it took a good deal of argument to persuade him to go to the old gentleman on a semi-friendly footing.

He went at last, but the glance he bent upon Sinn was far from pleasant. The latter was calm and confident.

"Sit down, Asa Frink!" he directed. "I am about to set you right on one point."

"If you can," Asa doubtfully replied.

"You don't think I can do it?"

"Hardly, but I ain't pig-headed. Prove that you was a friend ter Eunice an' Herbert Lan-ders, an' I'll eat my old opinion on ye."

"You can read, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Rube, remove a tin box which you will find under my pillow. In that box, Frink, you will find the best of proof that I was their friend."

The Citizen was not slow to obey. He wanted to see the inside of that box in which, his lively fancy had once told him, Solomon kept an untold amount of treasure. The box was brought out and Sinn opened it, but the romance faded away when Rube saw that the contents were restricted to papers, the greater part of which were letters.

Solomon selected a package and handed it to Asa with the brief direction:

"Read!"

The sailor obeyed, and for several minutes there was silence in the room. When he had finished he looked up and his bronzed face flushed a deeper red.

"Messmate," he exclaimed, "I'm ready ter take water when I'm down. I've wronged you, an' I'm sorry for it—"

"Enough said!" interrupted Sinn. "You and I were never brought much in contact, and you judged hastily. I do not blame you. Let us now come to an understanding. The past is gone and the dead we cannot help, but let us do justice to the living. Herbert and Eunice Lan-ders left a child, and that child is now living—a most estimable young lady, by the way. She must have the property unjustly held by Elijah Banderson."

"She must, and she shall!" declared Frink.

Solomon took a newspaper clipping from the box.

"Listen!" he directed; and then he proceeded to read aloud as follows:

"HAVANA, March 7.—Antonio Massana, the sailor and fatally injured in the drunken fight of the 5th inst., as before mentioned in these columns, died last night. Before his death he made a statement regarding a crime alleged to have taken place at No. 7, Rag Alley, New York, twenty years ago. A sailor named Herbert Landers, son of James Lan-ders, once a well-known sea captain, died at Rag Alley under circumstances which pointed to suicide. Massana tells a different story, and states that Landers was murdered, the fatal blow being struck by Perez Massana, cousin to the confessor.

"More than this was revealed by the dying man. He said that the object of the murder was to obtain possession of a will which was in Landers's hands, but that the strictest search of the premises by the murderers failed to reveal the coveted paper. Antonio Massana explained why this was so. He went on in advance as a spy, and saw Landers place some paper in a tin box and hide it. It was concealed just in time, and Antonio, aggrieved because he had not been given what he thought sufficient money by the gang, would not tell them that he had seen a paper thus concealed. He died in the belief that the paper was the missing will, and believed that it might still be found. He did not state where it was hidden, but a search of the front room on the second floor of No. 7, Rag Alley, might be of interest to some one. It might, or might not, show whether Massana's story was true."

Sinn ceased reading and laid down the clipping.

"From a foreign paper," he observed.

"I've read it, too," replied Frink.

"I suspected that you had. So has Elijah Banderson, and that explains why there has been such a rush for this room. By the way, did you see Landers killed?"

Asa drew a long, deep breath.

"You take me back ter the most gnoble part o' my life," he returned, gloomily. "I was then a sailor lad in my 'teens, an' I got in with the gang, the two Massanas an' one other man. That night I was in liquor, but I swear that I never suspected what we were here for until the job was done. Poor Herbert Landers was terribly dissipated, an' when we got here he was like a log with drunken stupor. He could make no resistance, an' he didn't. Perez Massana struck the blow—yes; Antonio was right."

"You are sure they did not find the will?"

"Dead sure."

"What came next?"

"I was hustled away, got aboard our ship

an' started on a three-years' voyage. When I got back I learned that Landers was mark down a suicide; that his wife an' child had di-appeared; and the case seemed gone up. I'm ashamed ter say I did not go ter the police with my story, but I was afeerd ter. Spanish Perez Massana had sworn to kill me ef I talked, an' that man an' his knife was the terror o' my life for years."

"I see. Well, what can we do now? The Banderson property was left by will to Eunice Landers and her heirs, without reservation, but, as that will was never found, Elijah Banderson inherited everything as next of kin. Herbert Landers, when intoxicated, stole the will from its place of safe-keeping, and thereby defeated the very object he wished to aid."

"Poor fellow!" muttered Frink.

"He was not all bad, but it was a fatal mistake for Eunice to marry him. He was his own worst enemy. Well, I have done a good deal of searching in this room for the lost will, but it is not yet found."

"Let me try!" Asa eagerly exclaimed.

"You shall. You and our young friend, Rube, shall tear the room to pieces, if need be, to get evidence. The tin box and the will must be found. One thing more: You must not leave this room to-day!"

"Why not?"

"I believe that Banderson will send a gang of assassins here to-night to find the will—perhaps to butcher me—and we want to surprise them."

"We will!" Asa declared. "Ef a gang comes, the Spaniard will be one of them, an' I'm just hankerin' for a go at him. He was one who nabbed me in the saloon an' took me ter Banderson's, an' I feel jest in a mood ter pay off old scores. Let Perez Massana look a little out!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HAPPENINGS OF A NIGHT.

A SCENE of confusion!

Asa Frink and Rube Rat-trap were working with zeal to find the tin box, and Sinn lay upon the bed, watching them eagerly. Boards and other refuse matter had been scattered about until it looked as though the house was being pulled down. All this had not been done without some noise, and twice Mrs. Odjacks had been to the door to remonstrate. Her opposition had been weak, for it was her opinion that Solomon had gone crazy, but, luckily, the good soul had not done any more than to talk through the keyhole.

If the owner of the house had been present, there would probably have been trouble right away, but Mrs. Odjacks did not own it, and she took no radical steps.

As the search of the room went on, the day wore away. Noon came and passed. The tin box had not been found, and the hopes of the searchers began to waver. The fear that, if human hands had left the box where Landers put it, the rats had dragged it away, became overburdening.

Asa Frink rested from his labor and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"I guess we shall hev ter knock the whole ship ter pieces," he observed.

"Whar do we tackle next?" asked Citizen Rube, who felt as fresh as ever.

"Give it up!"

"I suggested twice that we yank down that old corner cupboard. It's only nailed up, anyhow."

"I fail to see how it could be used as a hiding-place, but we are here to do a thorough job. Down with it!"

Asa continued to remain seated, but Rube sprung at the cupboard. The nails were loose as elsewhere in the room, and with the tools they had provided themselves with it was not hard work to remove it. The sailor gave his aid as it grew loose, and it was successfully lowered to the floor.

A vast amount of dust had gathered behind it, but Rube saw more.

The boards in the corner were very loose, and he tore off one with his hands. As he did this something came rattling down from the top, above where the cupboard had reached, and a small box bounced half-way across the room as though endowed with life.

Solomon Sinn forgot his pains and rose to a sitting position in the bed, while Rube pounced upon the box.

"Open it!" cried Solomon, shrilly. "Open it, boy!—open it!"

A tin box of some sort was in Rube's grasp,

and he wrenched away the clasp with unsteady hands.

A neatly-folded paper was inside.

"Here! here!" exclaimed Sinn, holding out his hands.

Rube passed over the paper, and the old gentleman unfolded it hastily. One glance he gave, and then his expression became triumphant.

"The will!—the will!" he uttered, hoarsely.

With these words he fell back on the bed, exhausted by the force of his emotions.

Asa hastened to Rube's side, seized his hand and began to slap him on the back with a force which almost took the Citizen's breath away.

"Bully boy!" the sailor cried. "You've done it at last! Shiver my timbers ef you ain't fit fur the quarter-deck! Ef you ever want ter sail the boundin' sea, jest you let A. Frink know it. I'll take you in, an' I dare swear no man ever had a better messmate!"

"Right! right!" gasped Sinn, from the bed.

"I'm happy ter hear yer praise," responded Rube, taking on an air of immense dignity; "but all this is nat'ral to the Rat family. We hev long noses, an' are powerful at smellin' out secrets. Take us where you will, two-legged or four, big or little, we are a few pumpkins, even though we be orphins an' widders."

"Come here!"

Sinn spoke abruptly, and Rube advanced to the side of the bed.

"Boy," said the old gentleman, "I told you that if you served me well you should be well-rewarded. You are too bright a boy to grow up in ignorance and misery, and whatever can be brought out of you by education shall be shown to the world. Who knows but you will be in Congress, yet, aiding to pass wise laws?"

"The fu'st one I'd interdooce there would be ter give the Rat family, big an' little, all the cheese an' honey, an' other solids, they could eat," was the grave reply.

"We'll attend to you later, my lad. For the present, put this room in order again and make ready for possible visitors at a later hour."

One o'clock at night.

Darkness and silence reigned in Solomon Sinn's room, but that by no means meant that all were asleep there. No one slept. Sinn, Rube and Asa were all awake and on the alert. They felt a strong belief that trouble would come during the night, but when or how they did not know.

They were more than willing that the enemy should make a manifestation; they were anxious for it.

There was a faint sound outside the house, near the window, like the scraping of the branch of a tree against the wall. A pause followed; then the window-sash rattled ever so slightly. No sound within. Another pause, and the window then glided upward. There was nothing to prevent it.

Citizen Rube had keen eyes, and though the wall across the alley prevented any outlining, he knew he could see the form of a man. The enemy's mode of action was revealed; a ladder had been placed against the wall and the window was the objective point.

The spy was cautious and did not stir for some time, but the profound silence reassured him. He crawled through the window and stood in the room. Other men followed—one, two, three. It was no small force which had come on the errand of rascality.

They crept forward with great care, and then occurred something which forcibly recalled the visit of Norton and Green. The slide of a bull's-eye lantern was turned and the light fell upon the bed. It had no occupant; not even a matress covered the bare frame!

The man with the light started back, an expression of uneasiness flitting across his face, but he was given no chance to investigate. Another, stronger light flashed up, making all the room bright, and a striking scene was revealed.

The intruders were at the center, and every man held a drawn knife. A formidable-appearing party they were, but it did not look as though they were to have things all their own way.

While they had worked others had been busy, too, and, as the startled desperadoes looked around, they found themselves cut off from the way of retreat by another party of men, and of the latter, two wore the uniform of the police!

A furious exclamation passed the lips of the man with the bull's-eye light—he was an evil-looking, swarthy-faced fellow—and he swung up his long knife.

"Trapped!" he hissed. "At them, messmates! Cut them down!"

"Tackle me first, Perez Massana!" cried a hearty voice, and Asa Frink dashed at the sailor.

It was the signal for the fight. The detected intruders made a break for the window, and the other party met them willingly. Massana avoided Asa and made a dash for a policeman, his knife held ready for a blow, but the blue-coat escaped without a scratch.

As the Spaniard rushed forward a lithe figure dropped at his feet, and he was flung to the floor with a crash. The obstacle was Rat-trap, and he had neatly tripped Massana at a critical time.

The fight was now well under way. The presence of the policemen deprived Massana's comrades of all desire to stay, and their rush for liberty was fearless and headlong. They went at their enemies like tigers, and blow followed blow in rapid succession.

Asa had not forgotten his desire to get at Perez, and, as the Spaniard arose he saw Asa again.

"Hound of an American!" he yelled, "are you bound to die? Here's at you, then!"

He leaped forward with a rush which had only one object, but Asa remained perfectly cool. With a skillful parry he turned the knife aside and, a second later, gave Perez a slash in the arm.

"There's one for old time's sake, you bloody imp!" he shouted.

The Spaniard recovered and made another rush, but once more Asa avoided him. He did more; not wishing to kill a man plainly intended for the hangman's care, he knocked Perez down and then disarmed him.

By that time the fight was waning. The policemen had done good service, and, as chance would have it, Rube had been on hand to foil every murderous attempt of the gang, which he did by adroitly tripping them just when they wanted most to be on their feet.

There was a series of clicks and the officers had their prisoners ironed, and a badly demoralized lot they were. The clubs of the policemen had left their mark, and the Spaniard's wound was bleeding freely.

Some off-hand surgery was resorted to, while Solomon Sinn, who was lying on a bed newly made for him in one corner, called Rube to him.

"This is our last night at Rag Alley," he announced. "My work here is done; the will is recovered and, by a lucky chance Perez Massana, the murderer of Herbert Landers, is captured; and now I am ready to take the case of Herbert Landers's child, for whom I have long cared, into court, and deprive Elijah Banderson of the property he wrongfully holds. Nor is that all; there is no room to doubt that Banderson instigated the attack upon Landers. If Massana confesses, there will be more trouble for Banderson."

"You do sort o' seem ter have him on the hip," the Citizen admitted.

"Matters have grown too serious for mere exultation. Let us speak of something else. You are to accompany me from Rag Alley!"

"Be it!"

"Most certainly."

"The four-legged rats will miss me."

"They will have to get along. As for you, if you do right you shall be well rewarded. I owe you much, and I shall not prove ungrateful!"

Time is a great changer of human events. He lays his hands upon things animate and inanimate, and like a magician alters all. What has Time done that need be noted here?

The murder at Number 7 has been avenged, and the Spaniard has paid the penalty of his crime with his life. Elijah Banderson, crushed by his misfortunes, sickened and died before his case was decided. Norton and Green were found to be fit candidates for Sing Sing, and were duly established there.

The recovered will did its work, and the Banderson property passed from Elijah's hands to those of Herbert Landers's daughter, who well deserved it.

Solomon Sinn, or John S. Kendricks, as he should be called, still lives. Sophronia Smith and her daughter continue to scheme for his property, and he keeps them in suspense, but they will never get a dollar; his will is made, and their names do not occur in it.

The old gentleman has kept his word to Rube. First he looked up the Citizen's past and found that his real name was Reuben Westcott. We are not able to add, as would, perhaps, be agreeable, that the boy was heir to a fortune. He was heir to nothing but Solomon's good-will,

but that went a long ways, for the young Philosopher was given a course of schooling, and proved himself, as might have been expected, a capable youth. Solomon believes in him thoroughly, and will do all he can to help the young man to achieve success.

Asa Frink is still a sailor. He has left off drinking, and now he is Captain Frink, of the good ship Rolling Wave.

THE END.

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